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Mercury Mystery BOOK-MAGAZINE

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HUNT THE MAN DOWN

by WILLIAM PEARSON

The Man Who Beat the Income Tax

Doctors in Crime
EDGAR LUSTGARTEN

Killer on the Run
EDWARD D. RADIN

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Mercury Mystery
BOOK-MAGAZINE

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A New Mystery Novel

Alive, Carol Malden's husband offered her poverty and old age; dead, he was worth $150,000. But when his plane crashed, killing everyone on board, Carol found herself facing the greatest terror she had ever known . . .

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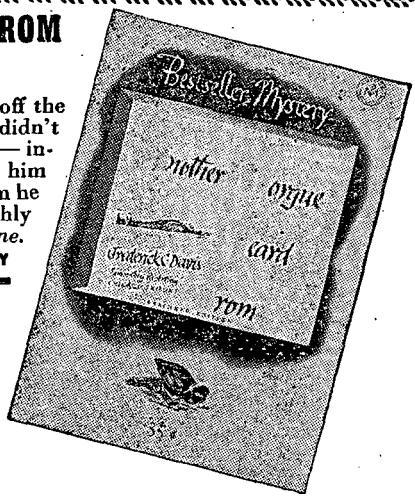

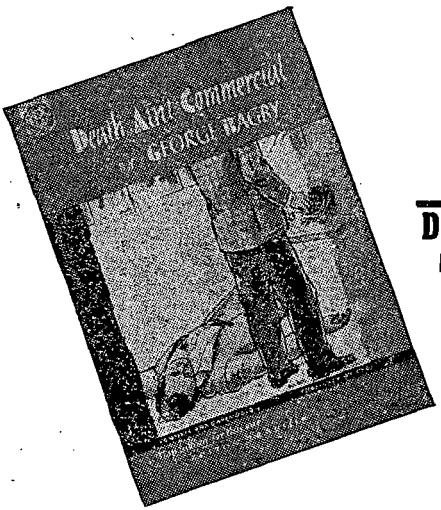

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William Pearson describes himself as ". . . a 33-year-old ex-soldier, ex-lawyer, ex-student . . . married to an impatient wife, and father of an impatient son — impatient to be nine." This Colorado resident, author of many top-flight articles in some of America's leading magazines, is perhaps best-known for his novel, THE BEAUTIFUL FRAME. *Translated into seven languages, this book marked Mr. Pearson's debut into the world of the mystery novel.*

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HUNT THE MAN DOWN

by William Pearson

CHAPTER ONE

THE WOMAN STOOD BY herself at the cocktail party. Her name was Carol Malden. She was twenty-seven, blonde and statuesque and sensuous, and her long hair falling about her shoulders and the tight sheathing of her white, sleeveless linen dress emphasized her really startling beauty. Her eyes were as blue as a day on the Mediterranean, her face and arms and legs were tanned from long hours in the sun, and nobody would have guessed that she wished for anything. But she did. She wished she were richer than sin. She wished she were eighteen again. She wished her frightened, middle-aged husband were dead. Christ, the things she wished!

Swimming pools, cream convertibles, and cocktail parties were her habitat, or should have been, but life or fate or some unknown adverse force was driving her from these things that were hers as surely as civilization drove the animals from the forest. The white linen dress was frayed at the seams, her lipstick and perfume came from the dime store, and her white pumps were scuffed under too many applications of chalky polish.

Day and night the injustice of it tormented her, rankling and throbbing

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like an old wound. But it was her bed; she had to lie in it. What was more, she had to lie in it with *him*.

Divorce was futile now; he had nothing to give her except his bills. The best she could hope for was another heart attack. Then she would get the insurance. A bitter smile flitted across her lips. She would not even get that if the next premium wasn't paid.

Two years ago, when they married, it had all seemed so simple. It was simple. George wanted her, she wanted money, and they made the fair exchange in a Las Vegas wedding chapel. She was in Las Vegas divorcing her first husband. There was no alimony there either. She had married her first husband for love, but he was an insurance investigator getting poorer every year on white-collar wages and white-collar dreams, financed by white-collar credit. She wrote him a note one day and left for Las Vegas.

George Malden was in Las Vegas to have a good time. Carol, when she learned he owned a furniture factory and that he came from the same city, gave him one. But George picked up more than Carol in Las Vegas; he picked up ten thousand dollars at the tables. A year later Las Vegas got the money back with interest. Before he was through he lost three hundred and ten thousand dollars. He came home with a thin smile on his haggard face and a pain in his left arm. A week later he had his heart attack.

But all that was history and she was tired of it. Absently and impersonally, as if she were turning an hourglass upside down, she poured her drink into the miniature jungle of a planter. She glanced at herself critically in the elongated mirror over the mantel and listened vaguely to the sounds of the cocktail party swirling about her like the remote music of a fiesta in the square. In the mirror she could see the same people she always saw at these parties, wearing the animated faces of tired puppets unwillingly forced into another encore.

Carol Malden felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Hart McIntire, her husband's lawyer, offering her another drink. Hart, a tall, crewcut blond of thirty-five, moved with an athlete's easy grace, but the picture was deceptive. His body was soft from too much drinking and his face was soft from too much indecision, and his eyes spied on the world with the lurking resentment of a man unfairly sentenced by a hanging judge. Now he said with a trace of sarcasm, "Your husband's drunk again."

"I wish I was," Carol replied tonelessly.

"Is he still making the trip tonight?"

"Yes," she said. "Will it do any good?"

"No. They all know he's in trouble. If he can't get money here, he can't get it in New York. He's through." He took her by the arm and guided her expertly from the crowded living room into the solarium. Wordlessly he slid the panelled door shut, clutching for her shoulders with a clumsy fervor. His mouth sought the sullen promise of her lips but she pushed him away

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impatiently. He cursed under his breath and wiped his lips with his handkerchief. "*I* wish you were drunk too," he said.

"It wouldn't make any difference."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm fed up, that's all. I think he's going to live forever."

"You're too impatient."

She arched her eyebrows. "Who's impatient?"

He grinned. "You refrigerated Aphrodite!"

She laughed easily and her voice took on a huskier, more intimate note. "Remember that night we went up to the lodge?"

He glanced at her suspiciously, nodding slowly.

"Well?" She paused significantly, measuring her man. "George still has that fifty thousand dollars of life insurance."

"I was drunk that night," he said quickly. "So were you."

She looked up at him demurely. "Neither of us has the guts to do it, do we? We certainly can't pretend it's our conscience which stops us."

"Let's skip it," he said angrily.

She changed the subject. "What do you want from life, Hart?"

"The same thing you want, you scheming little nymph."

"Sometimes you can wait too long." Carol ran her fingers lightly and impulsively along his arm. "Listen to me," she said quickly. "I was married to an insurance investigator. I know how insurance companies operate. I know it could be done. All it takes is guts. And a plan."

"And no conscience. They took out mine with my tonsils."

Her grip tightened on his arm, responding to the muffled sound of voices in the hallway. "Somebody's coming. We can't talk here."

Hart slid the door open and took her arm, leading her back to the living room.

They both saw her husband at the same moment he saw them. He lumbered toward them uncertainly, his face flushed by liquor, his bald head covered with perspiration. "Where've you been?" he mumbled querulously, grabbing her arm roughly. She pulled it away and he said, "You driving me to the airport?"

"No," she said, "I told you that earlier."

"I'm drunk," he said miserably, "I can't drive."

"There are taxis."

"My loving wife," George Malden said to McIntire. His shoulders drooped and he added sadly, "They've got me licked, Hart. I don't have the fight in me any more. I'm going under."

Hart smiled blandly. "I wouldn't say that, George. You can still swing it in New York. A loan of three hundred thousand will pull you through."

"Three hundred thousand," George Malden repeated. His eyes were close to tears. "Good God, that used to be peanuts! Now you know what

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I've got between me and the brink? A thousand dollars. And all the debts. I've got the annual premium on my life insurance coming up and nothing to pay it with. The bank's going to foreclose on the house and the factory. How can a man drop so far so fast?"

Carol said, "I'm sure Hart doesn't want to hear the story of your troubles again, George." She glanced at her watch. "It's seven o'clock. You'll miss the plane."

McIntire said, "I'll get you a taxi." He left and George put a hand on his wife's arm, gently this time. "Carol, I'm saying things I don't mean. I'm not myself. God, you're so beautiful. If I get this loan, things will be different. You'll see. In a year I'll be back on my feet. I'll take you to Europe."

Carol patted his hand absently. "I would have driven you to the airport," she said. "It's just that I'm not feeling well tonight."

"That's all right, Baby," he said gratefully. "You take good care of yourself. I'll be okay." He started to the door, glancing back over his shoulder, hoping that Carol might be waving, but she was already the center of an admiring group of three brisk young men he had never seen before. They were outdoing themselves in a battle for her attention, but the sultry invitation of her lips, slashed like a red danger signal across her face, was not for them. It was not, George had long ago found out, for him either.

"Not leaving, are you, George?" the host asked from behind the bar.

George was surprised the man even knew his name. "Got to catch a plane," he mumbled.

"Too bad," the host said cheerfully. "The party's just starting to roll."

Malden walked on. Behind him a woman's voice whispered confidentially, "Who's that old relic?"

George Malden slouched a little more. The fall from grace, he thought, the fall from grace. In front of him Hart McIntire was saying, "The cab should be here any minute."

"Thanks, Hart. Look after Carol, will you?"

Hart laughed. "Then who would look after me?" They walked to the door. Hart said, "Where's your suitcase?"

"In the car."

"I'll get the suitcase," Hart said and vanished into the evening shadows.

George pushed his hands into his pockets and stared at the night. In the distant lower sky, black clouds skittered on a windy path across the moon, and higher, arcing to the zenith, the neon diamond of the evening star glistened with a solitary splendor. Near at hand a sprinkler played softly behind a hedge and the summer air, lapping gently at his face, was sweet.

A car appeared from nowhere and squealed to a stop. A sweaty, bilious face poked out at him. "You the party wants the airport?"

George nodded and in a moment heard Hart's footsteps crunching on the gravel. Hart opened the door for him and handed the suitcase through. The

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cab shot forward, turning onto the Mill Road that wound like an asphalt river down into the valley.

The airport terminal building was a sprawling complex of pink terra cotta with a bastardized pueblo architecture.

George Malden checked his suitcase and wandered over to one of the machines that sold airline-trip life insurance. He stood there feeding quarters into it as if it were a slot machine, thinking, with a grisly, academic detachment, that the insurance he was buying now, combined with what he already had, made him worth more dead than alive. He bought a magazine and went out onto the concrete apron, dodged a motorized luggage dolly and walked stiffly from the field gate to the plane. The stewardess, a pretty girl in a slate-blue uniform, took his ticket, smiled efficiently, and led him to his seat. His seat companion, a huge man in a wrinkled Palm Beach suit, shifted unhappily to make room for him and George stared forlornly at the antiseptic toweling on the seat ahead. The pilot revved the motors.

The fat man beside him wheezed and blew his nose, fumbling awkwardly with the safety belt. "I never been on a plane before," he said tentatively.

George grunted noncommittally.

The plane started its take-off run, shambling down the runway with a lopsided rolling gait. The fat man gripped George's arm. "We aren't going to make it."

But they were in the air, circling slowly, and down below, as the plane banked gracefully, they could see carlights moving, bug-like, along the highway, and the city itself, marked by a grid of twinkling reds and yellows. The pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker saying they would go through a few rain squalls. The man beside him lit a cigar and its vile smell was too much. George said, "You're just supposed to smoke cigarettes."

The fat man stared at him disagreeably. "Augh, says who?"

"Ask the stewardess." It was too ridiculous, he thought, getting in an argument over this. He grinned. "They'll make you get out and walk."

"I'll put it out," the man said ungraciously. He sighed. "You and my wife would get along fine."

"Maybe we could trade wives," George said. He reached in his pocket for his wallet and handed his companion a picture of Carol taken on their honeymoon. Carol had been wearing a flowered-print dress, and as he had taken the picture a gust of wind had come along to blow her hair and lift the skirt slightly, giving her an added gamin charm. The man whistled.

The man smirked. "Kind of afraid to leave her alone, aren't you?"

George flushed. "She loves me," he lied.

The pilot's voice broke in on them. "Please fasten your seat belts. We're about to pass through some downdrafts."

The weather got bad and they could hear rain splattering the windows and wings. The plane rolled from side to side. Lightning flashed in the

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distance. The pilot told them there was nothing to worry about. The fat man rubbed his hand against the condensation forming on the window. His voice caricatured his panic. "The propeller on one of the engines has stopped!"

George smiled with the pleased superiority of an old traveller. "No, that couldn't happen. Not on one of these planes."

But the pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker just then. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're having trouble with the Number One engine. There's nothing to worry about but we're turning back to get it fixed. Please keep your seat belts fastened."

The stewardess happened to pass by. "It's all right." She smiled weakly, bracing herself as a sudden lurch of the plane sent her falling toward them. A woman in the back of the plane screamed and the stewardess hurried off.

Giant sparks from the exhausts shot by the window like tracers and the engines coughed hoarsely, as if they were choking on a mixture of oil and gasoline too rich for their aluminum arteries. George wiped a trickle of perspiration from his face. His hand was shaking. "These planes can fly on two engines," he said."

The pilot's voice broke in again and this time its alarm was too apparent to be missed. "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain calm as I explain the situation. More engine trouble has developed. We won't be able to make it back to the airport. I'm going to try to land. There is no danger."

The ugly smell of Death floated down the aisle and an elderly woman fingered her rosary. A man's high-pitched voice cried out plaintively, "Why should it happen to me?" A woman shrieked, "Stewardess! Stewardess!" and a man cursed. The plane roared downward, shuddering helplessly as the wind ripped at the wings. The pilot's voice said, "We're at three thousand feet. Prepare for a crash landing. Be sure your safety belts are fastened. Damn it, Charlie, help me on the stick!"

George Malden shut his eyes. "Carol!" he cried, "Carol!"

The plane hit the earth with a shattering roar, crumpling as if it were paper, and then for awhile, all was silent around the wreck except for the steady spattering of the rain and the occasional clap of distant thunder.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ACME LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY'S claim department took the whole twentieth floor of the Acme Building. Small, gray metal desks stretched back in tidy rows behind the double glass doors opposite the elevators like silhouettes of project houses seen from a distance. On the other side of the

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glass doors a pert redheaded receptionist thumbed through the morning paper.

An elevator door opened noiselessly and Shep Henderson, his seersucker jacket thrown over his arm and a folded magazine crumpled in his hand, walked across the faded beige carpeting to the glass doors. The receptionist smiled mechanically and indicated the rear office with a jerk of her thumb. "He's been looking all over for you."

Shep grinned. He was a leathery-faced six-footer, thirty years old, and his eyes had the crinkled lines that come from too much squinting into the sun. There was a hardness in the corners of his mouth, even when he smiled, and it was difficult to tell whether he cared too much about the important things or whether he did not care at all.

"It's going to be a hot one today," he said, rubbing a hand through his thinning hair. It had been gray a long time now.

He strolled past her into the main office. At the end of the long room a door led off to the private office of Martin Crass, Acme's head claim investigator.

Shep entered without knocking and tossed his coat on a chair. The man behind the long mahogany desk looked up with a weary smile. Martin Crass was a tall, thin, cadaverous man of sixty who had been growing old in the same job for thirty years. He rummaged absently through a folder before he spoke. "What do you hear from Carol, Shep?"

The smile faded from Shep's face and his eyes hardened. His voice had a granite edge. "I don't hear anything. She went her way. I went mine."

"Did you know her husband was dead?"

Shep leaned forward, his body taut. "Dead? No, I didn't know he was dead."

Martin folded his bony fingers across his chest. "He died last week. George Malden. He was a policyholder and he had fifty thousand with double indemnity for accidental death. On top of that he bought fifty thousand of aircraft accident. He was on that plane which crashed last week. The plane burned. No bodies. Nothing." Crass looked up morosely. "The damn insurance would have run out five days later, too."

"Who gets the money?"

"His wife. She's already filed a claim and proof of loss."

"It sounds open and shut. We pay, don't we?"

"Malden's dead. He has to be. So we pay all right. Still, there's a hundred and fifty thousand involved. It's worth some time to check all the angles."

"You mean he might not have been on the plane."

"He was on it. The stewardess checked him in on the flight list."

"Any reason to think something's wrong?"

"Nope." Crass pushed the file across his desk. "The CAB report is in here. Like always, they say pilot error, but there wasn't much left to

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figure out how it happened. You'll see from the report that a farmer's wife named Sweeney saw the plane just before it crashed. You can talk to her. It was raining like hell that night."

Shep pulled the file toward him. "All right, Martin," he said, "why'd you pick me?"

Martin sighed. "I was waiting for you to ask that." He screwed his face up, as if he were squeezing his thoughts into place. "You don't have to tell me your private life is none of my business. But Carol was a beautiful girl. I always wondered why you didn't get back together."

Shep shifted position uncomfortably. He spoke bitterly. "You didn't know her, except to look at. She had the wrong dreams, Martin. I learned the hard way. She was a girl who belonged in mink and fast cars. I knew it when I married her; I thought I could slow her down. Well, I was wrong." He smiled bleakly. "I knew she was back in town and married to Malden. But I never looked her up and never ran across her. Maybe Malden gave her what she wanted; I wouldn't know."

Crass played absently with his watchchain. "With a hundred and fifty grand, she should have what she wants. Maybe she'd like to hear from you."

"And maybe she wouldn't. Meanwhile, what do you want me to do, go out to the scene of the crash?"

Crass nodded. "Only about five hundred souvenir hunters will have been over the ground before you. But it'll be a start."

"I'm surprised we hadn't sold some aircraft-accident stuff to any of the others on the plane."

"That's the advantage of competition," Crass said dourly. "The passengers fed their quarters into some other company's machines."

"You paying Carol off right away or stalling her?"

"We'll hold her off until we see what you turn up."

"All right, I'll phone you later." Shep started for the door, then stopped. "We got a picture of Malden?"

"No. Haven't you ever seen him?"

Shep shook his head and Crass said, "You can get his description from the physical. It's in the file. He was in his fifties." Crass shuddered imperceptibly, as if remembering his own mortality. "Too young to die. I'll guarantee you that." He stood up and limped to the door. "Shep?" he said awkwardly.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to go. I can get somebody else."

"Sure. But why bother? I'm already on my way." He started walking back to the elevators, reading the file on the crash as he went.

Rolling, summer-scorched fields, undulating slightly as if they were part of a brown and yellow patchwork quilt spread over a sleeping giant, followed the ribboned highway into the horizon, and along the section lines rotting,

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barbed-wire fences and bumpy, dirt roads led back to lonely farmhouses.

When he drove in the rutted driveway of the Sweeney farmhouse a mangy dog appeared from nowhere, and, with its tail between its legs, began yelping at him. Weeds and parched field grass choked the narrow path leading to the screened-in porch, and on the shingled roof the candelabra prongs of a television antenna poked silver fingers at the sky. Shep tried the front door and the dog growled from a safe distance. Nobody answered. He went around to the back.

A stolid, red-faced farmer's wife in a faded blue cotton dress and brown slippers was hanging up wash. She eyed him suspiciously, cursed at the dog, took a few more clothespins from the pocket of her shapeless dress, and stretched a pair of coveralls across the line.

"Mrs. Sweeney?" Shep said.

"Yeah."

"My name's Henderson. I'm from Acme Life Insurance Company."

She stared at him bitterly, as if he symbolized all her memories of hard winters and lean summers. "Life insurance," she spat. "Where would we get that kind of money?"

"I'm not selling anything," he said. "I want to talk to you about the plane crash the other night."

She stuck a clothespin in her mouth and spread a yellowed sheet. "My husband ain't here."

"I want to talk to you, not him." He made a move to help her with the sheet. "You saw the crash."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I didn't see it."

Shep said, "I happened to be reading a report by some government people who investigated the accident. They said you saw it."

She backed down a little. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. What business is it of yours?"

Shep sighed and reached for his wallet. He tucked a ten-dollar bill in the wicker laundry basket. "See what you can remember about that night, Mrs. Sweeney."

She bent over to pick up the money, grunting uncomfortably. She tucked the bill between her massive breasts. "We was having trouble with the chickens that night. I come out to the coop to look at them. I heard the plane overhead, real low. I thought it was going to hit the house." She turned slowly, staring at the tumbledown structure with the tired remains of an old anger. "Too bad it didn't hit the house. We might of got a new one."

"Could you see the plane?"

"Not in the rain. I saw some lights."

"It was on fire?"

"No. These was plane lights. Blinking on and off all the time."

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Shep wiped his face with his handkerchief. "All right. Then what?"

"I lost sight of it. I stood there a minute. Then I heard the crash. Boom. I covered my face. It was like it was right next to me." Mrs. Sweeney kicked the laundry basket a few feet down the line. "I ran in the house and got the old man. We both came outside again."

"Could you see the plane burning?"

"The plane wasn't burning, Mister."

Shep frowned. "What do you mean, it wasn't burning? The report says the plane burned."

"It didn't burn. Not then, it didn't. It was five minutes later the fire started."

Shep tensed. Fires that started five minutes later didn't start by themselves. "You sure about that?" he asked.

"Sure I'm sure."

"I didn't see anything about that in the report the government people wrote.

"I didn't tell them."

"You didn't tell them!"

"They didn't ask me." She gave him a toothless grin. "They didn't give me no ten dollars either."

"Did your husband see anything unusual?"

"A wreck ain't very usual for around here. He saw the wreck."

"But nothing at the scene which seemed strange?"

"No. You want to talk to him?"

"Not now. Did any of your neighbors who had seen the wreck stop in at your house that night?"

"It wasn't a night for visiting. We had a visitor a couple of hours later, though." She laughed gleefully. "The old man winged him."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes lit up, like an old soldier recalling old battles. "About midnight, maybe a little after, the dog started barking. He's no prize but he knows when something's up. The old man got his gun and sat by the kitchen window where he could see the barn and the chicken-coop. You'd be surprised what they'll steal from you. The rain had stopped and the old man saw him. Some hobo crossing the yard. The old man yelled to him, but he started running. The old man gave him a blast. The fellow screamed, so he must of been hit. But he got away."

"Did your husband see his face? What was he wearing?"

"Didn't see nothing. Just this figure out back. It was good shooting."

"Did you find any tracks out there the next day?"

"Never looked."

Shep glanced at the kitchen window. "About where was this man when your husband saw him?"

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Mrs. Sweeney pointed to the open space between the chicken coop and the barn and Shep examined the area. The ground was hard now, but there were still indentations from the mud of last week, some unrecognizable, some vaguely identifiable as horseshoe prints, some that were probably cow hooves, some the outlines of what appeared to be rubber boots, and others resembling the marks made by a man's street shoes. Shep signalled to Mrs. Sweeney and showed her the boot marks. "Your husband wear anything like that?"

"Sure. We both do."

"Then these," Shep said, pointing to the shoe imprints, "were probably made by the hobo?"

"Maybe."

Shep took a steel tape measure from his pocket and jotted down measurements. He took another ten-dollar bill from his wallet. "Thanks, Mrs. Sweeney."

He got in his car, took a road map from the glove compartment and saw that there was a small town a few miles down the road. He stopped there, questioned the local barber, and the doctor but could elicit no information about a stranger in town.

He put in a call to Martin Crass.

"I'll make it brief, Martin," he said. "There was a five-minute interval between the crash and the time the plane caught fire. I suppose something like that could happen by itself, but let's assume that Malden started it."

"Why Malden?" Crass asked sharply. "Why not another passenger?"

"It could have been. I've got some ideas on that, too."

"All right, I'll assume with you. What kind of picture do you get?"

"Malden stays around until he's sure the fire has really caught. Then he starts slogging across the fields in the darkness, not quite sure what his next move should be. He gets far enough away from the plane, then spends a couple of hours trying to figure out how to play it from there. He stumbles across a farmyard and a dog starts barking. The farmer thinks it's a chicken-thief and takes a couple of shots at him. One of them connects, and he screams.

"When daylight comes, Malden doesn't know what to do. He's got a bullet wound. He's wet, dirty, hungry, unshaven. But he can't take a chance on buying clean clothes, fixing himself up, until he's a hell of a long way from the wreck. On the other hand, he can't take a chance on somebody's seeing him the way he is now. Maybe he hides in a barn the next day and travels at night. I tried the nearest town. He didn't put in an appearance there."

"You're spinning it pretty thin."

"I know I am. But you, my friend, were the one who sent me out here."

"What do you want to do?"

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"Spend some time on it. Maybe some money. There were some shoe imprints in the Sweeney farmyard. I took the measurements but you'd better send someone out to take some plaster casts. Mrs. Sweeney'll show him which ones. I'd like to check them with Malden's shoes."

"What would Malden's motive be?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand is a pretty good motive for anyone."

"But Malden's supposed to be a wealthy man. He'd have to be prepared to drop out of sight, maybe move to another country and start a new life with a new name."

"A credit report'll give us the answer to that one."

"Maybe he wanted to get away from his wife," Crass said sarcastically.

Shep clenched his teeth. "No man ever walked out on Carol."

"That would mean Carol was in on it."

"That's right," Shep said quietly. "She'd have to be. The money's paid to her as his beneficiary. Without her he's nothing."

"Tell me something, Shep. How do you feel about it?"

Shep laughed mirthlessly. "It's a hell of a time to ask me that. Whose idea was this?"

Crass changed the subject. "Even the delay in the start of the fire and the shoe imprints, if they fit, aren't enough to hold up payment."

"I don't want to hold up payment. If there's something funny going on, I don't want anybody getting suspicious. Not yet. Pay Carol off. That'll smoke Malden out — if there is a Malden."

"Supposing we pay off and there is a Malden. They might get away with the dough before we nabbed them."

"That's right. They might. Those are the odds." Shep smiled wearily at his reflection in the streaked bank window. "It looks like that's another chance you'll have to take, Martin."

There was a long pause and finally Martin said, "All right, you talk to Carol. Tell her we'll pay off right away. What do you want me to do?"

"Get a financial report on Malden. Send somebody out to the Sweeney's to get those prints before we lose them. I'll check with you when I get back."

CHAPTER THREE

THE SECLUDED RESIDENTIAL STREET, flanked by expensive houses and arched by the spreading branches of massive elms, resembled a cloister incongruously patrolled by chauffeurs in Cadillacs instead of monks in meditation. The houses were in the seventy-thousand dollar class but they were jammed together like bargain-hunters at a one-cent sale.

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As Shep Henderson drove down the street he noticed a Ford coupe parked under an elm a few houses beyond the Maldens'. A shabby little man in dark glasses sat behind the wheel reading a newspaper.

The Malden house started off at one end as a rambling white brick rancho, but half-way through the owner or the architect must have changed his mind; it was finished as a modernistic two-story redwood, set off by a rainbowed picket line of wilting flowers. Over the three-car attached garage was a railed sundeck, and on the sundeck was a loungechair. On the loungechair was a girl. She was lying on her stomach. Shep could see only her back and one arm swinging at the side of the chair. He would have recognized her anywhere.

He picked up a handful of pebbles from the driveway and tossed them onto the sundeck. She stirred lazily, not looking. "What's the matter with the doorbell?"

"Hello, Carol," he said.

She sat up quickly, startled by a familiar voice she could not place. She was wearing a black, strapless bathing suit. Blonde hair was tucked around her head into a knot at back, and her face and shoulders glistened from suntan lotion. "My God," she cried, "Shep!"

Shep's throat was dry and he cursed himself for desiring her. "I'm looking for Mrs. George Malden," he said bluntly.

"You're speaking to the Widow Malden. But you can call me Carol. What brings you to my door? Wait, don't tell me. You have a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

He shook his head. "I just came to express our regrets."

"I don't blame you for having regrets. It must be quite a blow. Well, come on up. The front door's open. The stairs are on the left. Don't touch the silver, though. It's all inventoried."

Shep tried the front door. There was a short hallway, and off the hallway to the right a sunken livingroom crowded with pastelled love seats and kidney-shaped glass tables. A baby grand piano monopolized the corner nearest the entrance. Shep, noticing a man's framed photograph on the piano, walked over to inspect it. The man was middle-aged and bald. Probably Malden, Shep thought. He listened a moment, then quickly opened the frame and removed the picture. He rolled it carefully and put it in his inside coat pocket.

He went upstairs and out onto the sundeck. Carol now had a white cardigan sweater thrown over her shoulders and she was sitting with her knees tucked against her stomach, painting her toenails. They both stared at each other uncertainly, afraid to make the first move. Finally Carol laughed nervously. "It's funny," she said, "I thought you were probably dead."

He smiled indifferently. "You've done all right for yourself. You ought

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to look after those flowers out front, though. They're the ones that are dying."

"I guess I'm not a gardener. But you're wrong about my having done all right for myself." She waved her arm in a sweeping gesture to indicate the house and everything in it. "The place is mortgaged to the hilt. The bank's giving me ten days to get out. The only thing I own is the car. George died a pauper."

"Not altogether. He still had insurance."

She smiled idly. "Yes, where's your little bag?"

"My bag?"

"Don't you carry the money in a bag?"

"You'll have to wait a little while on that. But not too long."

"I guess I can stand it. How have you been doing?" Her voice taunted him. "Still living nobly on nothing a month?"

"Well, I own a car too."

"It looks like the same one."

"It is. I keep it for sentimental reasons."

"I'll bet." Her blue eyes probed his curiously. "Are you married?"

"I'm considering it."

"What's her name?"

"You aren't really interested, are you?"

"But I am. You always wonder about those things."

"Her name's Nancy. She's a newspaper reporter."

"A working girl, no less. No champagne tastes this time."

Shep grinned and lit a cigarette for himself, then walked to the edge of the sundeck and looked down the street. The little man in the Ford coupe was still there. He flipped the match into the shrubbery. "Your husband was in the furniture business, wasn't he, Carol? You going to keep it going?"

She seemed amused. "That's in bankruptcy too. Believe me, there were more creditors than friends at the funeral. Their faces were longer, too."

"You know, I suppose, that what you get from us can't be touched by creditors."

"Indeed I do."

"What do you plan to do, then?"

"I'm open to suggestions." Her eyes swept restlessly toward the cloudless sky. "A trip around the world. A winter in South America." She put the nail polish away and held each leg up for inspection. "What would you do with that much money, Shep?"

"Nobody in his right mind would turn down a trip around the world. But you can't circle the globe forever."

"You can try."

Shep hesitated. He wanted to lead the conversation into a special channel,

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but he had to be careful. Carol was sharp, sometimes too sharp. Carefully he said, "Did he want you to act his age, or did he want to capture yours?"

"What does an old man with a young wife usually do? He tried swimming, horseback riding, he even tried skating and tennis. Two games had him puffing like a walrus. He had heart trouble, too. Well, no one can say I forced him."

"And I suppose he wore sports coats and bow ties. He probably bought them at Harlow's. They cater to the college crowd."

"No, he got all his clothes at Chilson's. I think he had some stock in the place once."

Shep smiled, pleased with his maneuvering Now he knew where to go to learn George Malden's shoe size. But Carol, misunderstanding the smile, said bitterly, "I've earned the money. Every cent of it."

"You probably have, Carol. In more ways than one. And you're lucky that it happened last week instead of this week. His insurance has run out since the crash. Did you know that?"

Her voice was disinterested. "I knew a premium was due. I didn't know just when."

Shep stood up. "Well, you've nothing to worry about. He's dead."

"You don't have to go," she said lazily. "This is a kind of reunion. I can fix the martinis."

"I still work for a living."

"What about the regrets you were supposed to express?"

"I guess it's too late for regrets."

"Maybe it isn't. We could explore it."

He avoided an answer and went over to the railing again. The Ford coupe was still there. "I'll call you when we have some word on the money. Anything you want?"

She smiled provocatively, wetting her lips. "Lots of things."

He returned her gaze with studied nonchalance and walked past her to the stairs. On his way to the car he heard her voice trailing after him, taunting him like a half-forgotten melody. "Give my regards to Nancy, girl reporter."

He turned once to look at her when he got in the car, but she was already lying back on the loungechair with her eyes closed. Nothing ever bothered Carol for long.

He gunned the car and as it shot by the Ford coupe, he memorized the license number. The man in the Ford might be waiting for somebody in one of the other houses, but with his racetrack face and Hollywood dark glasses, he was as out of place in this rococo Arcadia as a true Arcadian. He would find out downtown who owned the license number.

A few minutes later he was swinging onto the freeway and then he was downtown, and walking into Chilson's.

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He identified himself to the head of the shoe department and waited while his credentials were examined. The manager, with a smile of anxious despair, asked him what he wanted.

Shep said, "I guess Mr. George Malden bought his shoes here."

"Most of them," the manager said unhappily.

"He's dead," Shep said.

"I know."

"Do you have a record of his foot size? Length and width?"

The manager nodded. His voice quivered with a quiet pride. "We even have a cast of his foot."

"Would it be possible for me to borrow the cast? And get those measurements?"

The manager stroked his chin with aggravating deliberateness. "It's a rather unusual request. Why do you want them, Mr. Henderson?"

Shep, looking directly at the doddering old man, could see the little red lines of blood vessels in his eyes. Arteriosclerosis, he thought. "I don't know," he evaded. "My company just told me to get the information."

"Well," the manager said, "I'd like to help, of course. On the other hand, it's quite unusual. You will admit that. I think we ought to have Mrs. Malden's permission. We might be violating the law if we didn't."

Shep cursed silently. He'd seen old men like this one before. The streets were full of them, and they worried every little trifle to death, like a terrier shaking the stuffing out of a toy rabbit. The more you argued with them, the more adamant they became. The offer of a bribe would send them in panic to higher authority. "I'll check with my company for further instruction," Shep said curtly and left.

He crossed the street to the drugstore and phoned a friend in the Motor Vehicle Department. He gave his friend the license number of the Ford coupe and found that it came from a rental agency. He walked over to the car rental agency and asked for the name and address of the person who had rented the Ford. He talked to a sullen young man in a long white mechanic's coat but even a ten-dollar bill didn't get him his information. Shep was surprised. Integrity always turned up in the wrong places. He got in touch with another friend in the automobile insurance business. The friend knew the man who sold insurance for the rental agency's cars. The friend was sure he could get the information. It would take a little time.

Shep thanked him and went back to the office. Crass was waiting for him. "Well, you're right," Martin said, his cadaverous eyes mournfully studying the ceiling and his long, thin fingers playing nervously on his desktop, "Malden was in about as deep as he could be. Since his death his creditors have filed a bankruptcy petition in federal court. What about Carol?"

"She hasn't heard from him."

"Is that what you *know* or what you *hope*?"

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Shep smiled thinly. "I understand her pretty well, Martin. She's clever and she knows the angles, but I don't think she could fool me that easily. She didn't react when I dropped my hints. So far Malden's playing it alone. Unless his ashes are blowing over the wheatfields."

"It doesn't make sense for him not to be in touch with her."

"It does if he doesn't trust her. He might be waiting until she gets the money."

"He won't know when that is."

"Maybe he will. I think somebody's watching the house, watching Carol. I took his license number and I'm working now on trying to learn who it is. It's a rental agency car. My hunch is, Malden's getting information on everybody who comes to the house. If Carol leaves, Malden probably has her tailed." Shep lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift toward the ceiling. "Oh yeah, I found out where Malden buys his shoes. Chilson's. They even have a cast of his foot. But I outfoxed myself. The man who manages the department had to make something big of it. It was his first excitement in thirty years. He wanted to phone Carol for permission. If I'd offered him a couple of bucks, he'd have yelled for the police."

"It sounds impossible. An Acme investigator buffaloed by a shoeclerk. Why didn't you tell him why you wanted the information?"

"I considered it. But I didn't think the time was right."

"The time," Crass said drily, "is very rarely ripe for anything. Or is that an observation which leaves you unimpressed?"

"I haven't given up being impressed. I saw my ex-wife today. She impressed me. And I'm impressed with George Malden or anybody else who can engineer a scheme to get away with a hundred and fifty thousand bucks." Shep reached in his pocket and brought out the picture he had taken from the Malden livingroom. "I hope this is George Malden. I thought I'd have some copies made."

The phone rang and Shep reached for it. "Probably my call on the license number." It was. The friend in the insurance business told him that the name of the man who had rented the car was Tracy Clump. His address was the Burns Building. Shep thanked him and took a copy of the city directory from Martin's bookcase. "The car was rented by a Tracy Clump." He ran his finger down the page. "Here it is. Tracy Clump. Investigator. Burns Building. Where's that?"

"On Blake Street. Not too far from Skid Row."

"It figures. He must be working for Malden." Shep looked up. His voice was keyed to the excitement he felt. "I think I can bring it to a head. But I have to give Carol the money. I'd like to get it as soon as possible."

"The treasurer's office can have a check ready tomorrow."

"Good. I'll take it out myself. I think Malden'll be expecting it."

Crass intertwined his fingers and stared at Shep dubiously. There was a

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note of hostility in his voice. "It'd be interesting if Carol tried to run out on her husband. With the money. It'd be embarrassing too, for whoever let it happen."

"That's right," Shep replied laconically. "It might be bloody too. But that's the way it is. Big money doesn't grow on trees."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN, streaming through the satin-curtained bedroom windows, tinted the walls with the pinkish hues of seashells and coral.

Carol's white terrycloth robe gaped open and she smiled with frank, narcissistic delight at what she saw in the ovaled mirror. Then she thought of the money. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was all hers, all hers. The words kept coming back like the refrain of a popular song.

The doorbell rang, interrupting the reverie. It was Hart, and she grimaced to conceal her disappointment. She had hoped it might be Shep. But Hart was impervious to disapproval. Hart was beginning to bore her.

"Looks like we're celebrating," he said. "You must have the money."

"I get it tomorrow," she said impatiently. "The man from the insurance company just phoned." She wondered whether she should mention Shep and decided she should. Hart would find out later anyhow. "My ex-husband, no less. Like they say, it's a small world."

"Your ex-husband?"

She smiled, enjoying his discomfort. "You knew about him, Hart."

"Well, I knew you were married to an insurance man once. I just never thought of his still being around."

"Neither did I. It shows how wrong you can be."

The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted them. She walked over to the kitchen extension. "Yes," she said idly.

The voice at the other end was muffled. "Carol?" It sounded as if someone were speaking through a handkerchief. "Are you alone?"

"Who is this?" she asked crisply.

The voice was clearer now. "It's me. *George. Your husband.*"

Carol gasped and the martini-glow left her face. She gripped the receiver so tightly her knuckles were white. "This is a joke," she whispered, "a very poor joke. Now *who* is this?"

"No, it's really me, Baby. Can't you tell? I was the only one alive after the crash. And the idea just came to me. It was our chance for the fresh start. Wipe off the debts, wipe off the past. I set fire to the plane so they wouldn't find any bodies. Courage and vision, Carol. That's what you need.',

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"My God," Carol mumbled, "my God!" It *was* George.

It was too much, she thought, too much. Everything had been so right; now everything was so wrong. It must be, it had to be, a dream.

But the voice she heard didn't belong in a dream. It had the worried overtones of a fretful old man lecturing wayward relatives. "Haven't you anything to say?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

"What do you want me to say?" she replied numbly.

His laugh echoed unpleasantly. "You aren't very happy to hear from me, it seems. I thought you'd be overjoyed. Well, no matter. What about the money? Have you got it yet?"

"Of course I don't." She struggled for control. "Where are you, George?"

"Now, Baby," he remonstrated. "I can't tell you that. It could get you in trouble."

"Get me in trouble!" She laughed shrilly. "And this whole idea of yours. What do you think *it* will get me in?"

"It's a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Baby. Isn't it worth it?"

"You can't get away with it. You ought to know that."

"I can't, but I *am*. I'm dead. You read it in the paper, didn't you?"

Hart's fingers dug into her arm. "He's alive, isn't he?"

She waved him away. George's voice persisted, "When do we get the money?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what have the insurance people told you?"

She hesitated, then said quickly, "I haven't talked with them."

"Don't give me that, Baby. I haven't time to fool around with lies."

"Lies!" She hurled the word back. "Don't talk to me like that!"

He sighed, but his voice echoed harshly and cruelly, like the clanging of a rusty anchor chain unwinding too rapidly. "You're lying, Carol. You talked to your ex-husband this afternoon. He works for the insurance company, doesn't he?"

Her mouth dropped open and she stared dumbly at the telephone in her sweating palm. It was impossible, she thought, and shuddered. How could he know that? A cry of protesting despair leapt from her lips. "But he came because he *was* my ex-husband. He wanted to know if he could help."

His voice mocked her. "Wanted to know if he could help spend the hundred and fifty grand? Don't give me that stuff!" The words trailed off in a queer gurgle of hysterical laughter. "And my good friend, Hart. You haven't wasted any time getting together with him."

"What was I supposed to do? Go into a convent? Throw myself from a cliff?"

"I know, I know," he said, suddenly abject and apologetic. "You didn't know about me. But now you do, now you know I'm alive. So I want you to stay away from Hart, Baby. You're still my wife."

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"Am I?" she replied insolently. "You're taking a lot for granted."

"Such as?"

"Such as calling me like this. Did it occur to you this phone might be tapped?"

"It's against the law to tap a phone. They couldn't use it as evidence. Besides, they don't suspect anything. Why should they, unless you tell them? And you're not going to tell them, are you, Baby? You don't want to be broke again. You love the feel of silk too much. And I know I won't tell them. We could have a good life, Carol."

"We'd be criminals."

"Everybody runs from something."

She laughed nervously. "The trip to the grave's made you quite a philosopher."

His voice rose plaintively. "I love you, Carol. I think you loved me once." He paused, as if hoping for confirmation. "But," he added miserably, "we'll worry about that later. This is a business proposition. I want that money. I can't get it without your help. You can't get it without mine." He laughed hollowly. "It should be a beautiful partnership."

She bit her lip. "You don't seem to realize. I don't know when I'll get the money."

"Do you really expect me to believe that? Carol, I don't have time for coyness. I was shot in the arm after the crash. A farmer shot me when I was walking across his yard. He thought I was a prowler. I need a doctor badly. It'll take money and I want it from you."

"I don't have any."

"You have what was left in the bank."

"Doctors report bullet wounds to the police."

"Not if you pay them enough. Not the right doctor."

"Where would I find that kind of doctor?"

"You can find him. And you'd better do it fast if you want to keep me out of the hospital. Not that I have any illusions about your concern for my health. But if I end up in a hospital, somebody's going to stumble on the fact that I'm the man who was supposed to have died last week. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'll see what I can do," she said weakly.

"Do that, Carol, do that." A sharp click told her the connection was broken and she put the receiver back slowly, staring at it as if she were hypnotized. "Get me a drink," she whispered, and collapsed in a chair.

Hart hovered beside her. His face was white and drawn. "You're sure it was George?"

She gulped the drink. "Of course it was George."

"Okay, okay." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Hell, Carol, we can't afford to get mad at each other. Not at a time like this."

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"He's doing it for spite," Carol said bitterly.

Hart laughed drily. "Spite! He's doing it for a hundred and fifty grand. That's not a bad reason anytime."

"What are we going to do?"

"We could go to the police. Or the insurance company."

She clenched her teeth and her eyes smouldered. "Never! I couldn't go back to living with George. We'd be in a garret on Skid Row."

"You could divorce him. This masquerade of his would give you grounds."

"I'd be poor." She spoke the word with loathing, as if she were describing a hideous disease, and her body trembled like someone in the grips of fever. "I'd never have another chance like this."

He laughed unsympathetically. "You wouldn't have too much trouble finding somebody to look after you."

She turned on him furiously. "How can you say that! Do you want other men to have me?" With an effort she brought herself under control. Her eyes narrowed. "Listen, Hart, we could take the money and run."

"Sure. But there's still George."

"How can he stop us? He's already committed a crime, hasn't he, trying to defraud the insurance company? Anyhow, he can't come back to the life he's led. He's a pauper. His reputation's destroyed. A man like George couldn't face it." She tossed her head defiantly and her voice rang with the shrill righteousness of self-pity. "You don't know what it was like, living with him. What do you know about the days and the nights I spent with him?" She twisted the empty cocktail glass. "All right, Hart, what if I got the money and kept it and George went to the insurance company? What could they do to *me*?"

He swallowed his drink and poured another. "Nothing. Not at this stage. They'd have to prove you knew he was alive and were a party to the conspiracy, and they'd have to prove it by his testimony. But a husband can't testify against his wife."

"That's some encouragement."

"But you'd never get away with it. Not unless you worked out some kind of deal with George. Such as your taking part of the money, his taking part, and each of you going his own way."

"No," she said grimly, "George wouldn't agree to that. And neither would I. And even if *he* would, you know what would happen. He'd get drunk some night and talk too much, or get in an accident perhaps and be identified. A hundred things could go wrong."

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog barked eerily and Carol's glance went to the windows. The blood drained from her face. "What's the matter?" Hart asked.

"I saw something. *George is out there!*"

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"He couldn't be. He just phoned you."

"But he knew about my ex-husband coming this afternoon. How could he have known about that? Unless he was watching me." She shivered. "I'll have the locks changed tomorrow."

"He's not going to show up here."

"How do we know what he'll do? He might even try to kill me."

"He can't afford to. The insurance money would get tied up in estate proceedings. Your heirs, not George, would get it."

She wheeled to face him. "Oh, it's all right for you to talk that way. But you don't know George. He's desperate. He won't let anything stop him."

"You're playing for big stakes, Carol. Big stakes require big risks. How badly do *you* want a hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

"Badly, Hart, very badly. So badly it hurts." She tapped her foot, lost in her thoughts, and then her eyes turned up to his, luminous and soft, like a woman alone with her first lover. "We talked about it once, didn't we?"

He backed away nervously. "We talked about what?"

"You know," she said, "you know."

Quickly, frantically, as if his own voice frightened him, he said, "We were just talking then. We weren't really facing up to something."

"It was only fifty thousand then, Hart."

He reached for the cocktail shaker. His hands trembled. "We couldn't get away with it. You know that."

Her lips parted slightly, mocking him. "I'm glad to hear that *that* is your only reservation. I was afraid for a minute you had scruples."

"Don't joke at a time like this."

"Joke! I'm not joking, not for a minute. But we'd never be safe, would we, if we got the money and George was still alive? We'd always be wondering what he was doing or what he had done. Every strange knock on the door would be somebody coming to arrest us."

He shook his head. His speech was slurred by liquor and indecision. "I'm not agreeing to a thing. But supposing we did . . . supposing we did try what you're thinking. How would we do it? You don't just go out and do a thing like that. You need a plan."

She clutched his arm fiercely. "You're right, Hart. And I have one. I forgot to tell you. He was shot by a farmer the night of the crash. He says he needs a doctor to look after the wound. It makes it easy, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The next time he calls, I'll tell him I've found the doctor. I'll arrange to meet him that night in order to take him to the doctor." She smiled demurely. "The doctor will live out in the country somewhere. Now you see, don't you?"

He broke away from her. Sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't."

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"Wouldn't it be worth it, Hart, wouldn't it?" She moved close again, dropping her eyes demurely as if to hide promises she did not yet dare to let him see. "Nobody would ever know."

"I'll have to think about it," he said weakly.

She pouted. "We could be in South America next week. The planes leave every day."

"If something went wrong . . ."

"Nothing would go wrong."

His lips twitched nervously. "I don't know. I don't know. Where would we go?"

She moistened her lips, snaking her arms around his shoulders. "Rio, darling." Her fingernails dug into him and she mashed her lips to his until she felt the brief stirrings of response. She broke away, laughing softly. "We'll have so much fun in Rio, darling. You've never seen an ocean like the one down there."

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the next afternoon as Shep Henderson drove slowly down the elm-lined street toward the Malden house. The Ford coupe wasn't around, but there was another car, a Chevrolet sedan, and the same sallow-faced man was hunched behind the wheel, like a nervous sniper waiting for the enemy. It gave Shep a good feeling. A hunch had to work out sometimes. He would play this one for all it was worth.

He glanced at his watch. The bank would be closing in thirty minutes. That was the way he'd planned it. He didn't want Carol depositing the check he had in his pocket until tomorrow. It gave more time for things to happen. He was going to do his best to see that they did.

Carol was on the sundeck again and as he slammed the car door she took off her dark glasses and swung herself to a sitting position. She was in a white bathing suit this time and it hugged her like another skin, setting off the copper sheen of languid arms and graceful legs. Her eyes had a sullen cast, as if she had just been disappointed in a dream, but her smile mocked him with half-promises. "Come on up, Shep."

When he walked out onto the sundeck he tried for a nonchalance he did not feel. He smiled distantly and his glance took in a serving cart and ice bucket behind the loungechair. She wheeled the cart between them, saying lightly, "The occasion calls for champagne, doesn't it, Shep? It's the end of a long long road."

She bent to pick up the champagne bottle and the muscles in her thighs

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rippled smoothly, as if responding to a cue. "There you are, Shep." She peeked at him mischievously over the rim of her own glass. "To us. Long may we reign."

"It's your party. You can make the toasts." He studied her carefully, becoming aware of a tenseness he had missed yesterday. Or perhaps it hadn't been there. He wondered if she had heard from her husband since he last saw her. Shrugging, he said, "You're pretty happy, are you?"

"Of course. I've wanted money, I've got it. Why does everybody have to be hypocritical about money and happiness?"

"Are they supposed to be synonymous now?"

"Oh Shep, don't lecture me. Not today." She held out the bottle. "Another drink?"

He nodded. Now was the time to make the first step. Idly he said, "Mind a personal question?"

"I don't mind anything. Not anymore."

"Your husband's clothes. What are you going to do with them?"

She looked up at him suspiciously. "I hadn't thought about it. Why?"

"There's a janitor at our place. About your husband's age and build. He's been having kind of a hard time. Wife's paralyzed, he's almost blind. Everything he earns goes out for doctor bills. I thought maybe you'd like to help him out."

"Sure," she said, waving her arm vaguely, "take them all."

"A couple of suits and some shoes would be enough. It would be just like Christmas for him. I could load them in my car when I leave."

Looking out toward the street, Shep saw a car slowing in front of the house. A husky blond man got out. Shep said, "Looks like you've got company."

Carol jumped to her feet. "Oh, my God, it's Hart! Stay here. I'll be right back."

She disappeared into the house and he heard doors opening and closing frantically. By the time the blond man had reached the front door Carol was back, but now she was wearing a blue sundress and white pumps. She leaned over the railing. "Come on up, Hart." To Shep she said, "It's Hart McIntire. George's lawyer."

"He must own you. What's the matter, doesn't he like you in bathing suits?"

She laughed easily, tossing her head defiantly. "Nobody owns me. Nobody ever will." She spun away from him and walked over to the doorway, waiting for McIntire. When he appeared she took his hand and led him toward Shep, making introductions. McIntire grinned uncertainly, like a man trying too hard to make a good impression. "So you're Carol's ex-husband."

Shep returned the glance. "That's right. And your Malden's lawyer."

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"And also Carol's." McIntire put a possessive arm around Carol's waist. "Isn't that right, Carol?"

Carol frowned. "Yes, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have Hart." Unobtrusively she disengaged his arm. "Champagne, Hart?"

"Say, you're really living it up." His hand went out eagerly for the glass and he pressed it to his lips with a nervous relish. It seemed to give him confidence. His voice became patronizing. "Let's see, Henderson, you're actually an investigator down at Acme, aren't you?"

Shep smiled. It was an opening. He wondered whether he should take it. He wondered whether McIntire wanted him to take it. He turned to Carol, intercepting a warning glance she must have intended for McIntire. She recovered quickly. "Well, should we get on with the ceremony?"

"If you want." Shep took some papers from his pocket. "You have to sign these. Your lawyer can check them. They're routine."

McIntire examined them perfunctorily and passed them to Carol. Shep gave her a fountain pen and she signed with a flourish. "It seems so informal. I went through more red tape the first time I bought a dress on credit."

Shep took the check from his pocket, holding it up to the light as if he were examining the watermark. He folded it and gave it to Carol. He said solemnly, "Look after it. It won't look after you."

She made a face at him. "Sourpuss! But I don't care. Not today." She turned to McIntire, forcing out gaiety as if she were squeezing it from a tube. "I've got some little things fixed up on a tray. In the refrigerator. Would you mind, Hart?"

Hart scowled. Shep stood up. "Not on my account. I still work for a living. Can I get those clothes now?"

Hart's voice interrupted with a surly hostility. "What clothes?"

"Oh, there's a janitor at Shep's office about George's build. I was going to let him have some of George's clothes."

"How do you know," Hart asked Shep, "that this janitor is the same build? Did you know Mr. Malden?"

"We have his general description on the report of the physical he took when he first applied for the policy, Counselor." He started towards the door. "How about it, Carol?"

Her glance went uncertainly to Hart. Shep could see them trying to communicate and he cursed the lawyer under his breath.

Reluctantly now, Carol followed him and guided him through a hall to a bedroom where the blinds and curtains were drawn. She flicked an overhead fluorescent light and opened a closet door. "This was George's room. Well, you can help yourself. I don't want to look at it. Do you mind?"

She disappeared without waiting for an answer and he took a few suits off the hangers. Then he bent down for what he really wanted, the shoes. He threw the suits over his arm and started downstairs.

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He tossed the clothes and the shoes in the back seat of the car and slid behind the wheel. Carol and McIntire were standing at the railing, watching him curiously. Their faces were tight and drawn, as if they were arguing. Perhaps they were.

The Chevrolet was still parked down the street and its driver was still slumped behind the wheel, amusing himself by cleaning his fingernails with a penknife. Their eyes met briefly as Shep sped by.

Shep drove to the nearest drugstore and waited for twenty minutes to go by. Then he phoned the Acme receptionist. "A Mrs. Malden's going to be looking for me soon," he said. "Tell her I had to leave unexpectedly on emergency business."

Then he phoned Carol. "I need you at the office," he said grimly. "Right now!"

Her voice was alarmed. "What's the matter?"

"There's something wrong with those papers you signed. Get down here right away." He hung up quickly and ran to his car, heading back as fast as he could to her house. He parked on a side street. In a moment he saw McIntire's car roar by. McIntire and Carol were in it. Seconds later the Chevrolet sedan shot by. Shep smiled, relieved. It had worked the way he had hoped it would. Tonight he would have a talk with the driver of the sedan, Tracy Clump.

He started the car again and drove to Police Headquarters to see Lieutenant McAllister.

McAllister was assistant head of the Morals Bureau and had spent thirty years becoming an expert on petty vice in a big city. A tired resignation to the shortcomings of the human condition spilled over from his pale jowled face and the sad murkiness of his eyes, as if, over the years, he had come to feel a futile sympathy for the pimps and prostitutes and dope peddlers he kept sending back to jail. His small office was bare except for a flimsy pine desk and some faded oak file drawers.

He stood up as Shep entered, squeezing his hand in a bear-like grip. "It's been a long time, Shep, too long. We thought you'd forgotten your old friends."

Shep tried to smile. "I've been busy. Working."

McAllister sighed, picking up the stub of an old cigar. "What can I do for you, Shep?"

"I'm looking for a man. He's got a bullet wound. I'm not even sure he's in the city. If he is, I figure he'll go to a doctor. How many doctors are there, wouldn't turn in a report on a deal like that?"

"Not too many. If your man could pay enough, might be more."

"You keep a list of the ones who would do the work and not turn in a report?"

"Yeah, we got a list, but for our use only. It would really get us in a jam

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if it got out. And a list like that, it's never complete. You plan to go round to every one of these docs?"

"Something like that."

"You ever tried to crack a doc?"

"No."

"They don't scare easy. Too stuck up."

"I might buy the information."

"You want your man pretty bad."

"He's taking us for a hundred and fifty grand."

McAllister raised his eyebrows. "How about giving me a description? I might be able to circulate it."

"Would it get you in trouble?"

"I could handle it. What's he look like?"

"About fifty-five, weighs two hundred, bald, medium height. Bullet wound somewhere on him, so he might have a visible bandage." Shep took the Malden photograph from his pocket. "I've got a picture here."

McAllister studied it. "Looks average enough. Prosperous, even."

"He was, once."

"Well, I'll take care of it, Shep. Chances are we won't find him. If we do, I'll get word to you." McAllister walked to a file drawer and brought out a manila folder. "This is a list of the docs. I gotta go down the hall awhile." His mouth broke in a genial grin. "See that nobody takes it."

"Thanks, Mac."

"You don't owe me anything. Take it easy."

Shep spent the next five minutes copying the names of doctors from the folder. When he had finished he left.

Shep climbed in his car and drove uptown to the Stardust Lounge. He was five minutes early for his meeting with Nancy, but it was five minutes he could use. Nancy would have questions too, and he was tired of questions.

He pushed the familiar red lacquered door and stepped into the dim, red-leather world of the Stardust Lounge, pastelled by blue smoke and soft amber lighting. A three-man combo on a raised platform behind the circular bar tortured the rhythms of some old Dixieland jazz, while on the walls a set of painted polka-dot clowns danced with frozen grins.

He surveyed the booths quickly, looking for Nancy, and then ordered a highball. He was on his second when Nancy walked in. She was wearing a candy-striped cotton blouse and a denim skirt, and her oval face, without makeup, reflected a day's-end weariness, but she carried herself with the easy grace of a professional model and when she saw him, her eyes crinkled and a hand went to her short-cropped black hair, as if she wanted to be at her best. She slid onto the stool beside him and her hand groped for his, seeking intimacy and reassurance. "I got here as soon as I could, Shep. But what a day! This is the first time I've sat down. Anything new?"

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Shep nodded. "I gave her the check this afternoon."

"Oh." A frown crossed her face. "Has she changed much, Shep?"

He grinned, charmed by the elfin piquancy of her face and the worried candor of her soft brown eyes. Nancy's beauty was a quiet beauty, more apt to last, and her body was lean rather than sensuous, but it was still a woman's body. When she wanted to dress up, she could hold her own with the best.

"No, she hasn't changed. Not physically and not any other way."

"You think she knows her husband's alive?"

"I don't know yet. That's where I want your help."

"Mine?"

"Can you plant a story for me in the paper without having to tell him what it's about?"

"If there's an inducement for him."

"Such as?"

"Such as being able to tell him I'm onto a big story, and we'll get preferred treatment when it breaks. When you finally get hold of George Malden."

"*If* I do," Shep said. "And *if* there's a George Malden to get hold of."

"I'd better not tell the city editor that." She smiled. "What's the story we plant?"

"That Acme has paid out more to beneficiaries of its life-insurance policies this week than any other week in its forty-seven year history. You quote a James Bergman. He's Acme's home-office supervisor. Contributing to the size of these payments is an individual payment of a hundred and fifty thousand bucks to a Mrs. Carol Malden of 4015 Larchmont Road." Shep downed his drink and grimaced. "Can you do it?"

"I can try." She walked to a phone booth and he watched the sway of her hips as she went, wondering if she put that extra twitch in for him. He hoped so. It was too valuable to waste on strangers.

When she came back her eyes sparkled. "He bought it, Shep! And it goes in the last edition tonight!" Her body brushed his and she smiled at him over her drink. "Now how would you ever get along without me?"

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS SEVEN O'CLOCK in the evening, too early yet for the patrol car which drove slowly up and down Blake Street every night to have come on duty, but the two policemen who walked the Street as a pair were on hand, idly swinging their nightsticks as they checked the bars and surveyed the small

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groups of hostile, unkept men huddled in the shadows. Blake Street marked the north boundary of Skid Row.

George Malden stared down on the Street from the narrow airless window of his third-story flophouse room, shuddering with distaste as he listened to the coarse sounds of a woman's laughter down the hall. He watched the two policemen stop to talk with the swarthy proprietor of a pawnshop and then move on to interrogate a loiterer propped against a lamppost.

He turned impatiently from the window and began pacing the floor of his small room. His arm throbbed painfully from the bullet wound and he clutched it with his other hand, gritting his teeth and shaking his head. He sat down heavily on his cot, reaching for the medicine bottle and absorbent cotton, and dabbed his wound again. The inflamed area around the wound seemed to be spreading and the pain shot through his body like searing tongues of flame.

Wearily he stood up and wrapped a bandage around his arm. Then he put on his coat, opened the door slowly, suspiciously, and stepped into the darkened hallway. At the head of the stairs the seventy-year-old room clerk dozed in a soiled canvas chair, dreaming fitfully and gasping for each breath like a man too tired to live and too frightened to die.

Out on the street George Malden walked along quickly, hugging the shadows and glancing furtively over his shoulder every few steps. A man needed skill to be a fugitive, almost as much as he needed skill not to be one. He scurried past a penny arcade and across an alley to the place where he had been eating his meals, a tiny hole-in-the-wall with barely enough room for the counter and stools.

George Malden sat on a stool, propped his chin in his hand, and stared glumly at the unappetizing remains on the plate of an earlier customer. This squalid street was his prison, and except for his one trip to the private detective's office nearby, he had not stirred from it. Now his money was almost gone and from what Clump, the private detective, had told him over the phone about Carol's trip to the Acme offices this afternoon, he was almost sure she had received the insurance check. She might even be stupid enough to try to doublecross him. He clenched his fists under the counter. He had gone too far now to turn back; if he had to, he would kill her.

He would have to kill her anyhow — once he had the money. For he could never trust her again. He could take her with him to South America, away from Hart, away from all the other young men, but there would always be new ones, and she would make love to them all indiscriminately, taunting him, almost obscenely, with her contempt for everything about him except his money. Some day, if she found a way to do it safely, she might even turn him in to the police.

The counterman's nasal twang broke in on him. "What'll it be, Pop?"

"Chile," Malden said, looking around nervously. He did not want to be

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the center of even this much attention. He reached awkwardly for an evening paper somebody had left on the next stool and buried his face behind it. Gradually his eyes focused on the print and he began to read.

The stories seemed almost unreal: a movie actress divorcing her husband, a man standing for hours on a window ledge before he jumped to his death, a new speed record for airplanes — it was all part of another world, a world he had left and hardly remembered. Then, thumbing through the back pages he came across a story, half-buried in the patent medicine ads, that jolted him to trembling, electrified attention. The story read:

ACME MAKES RECORD PAYMENTS

James Bergman, home-office supervisor of the Acme Life Insurance Company, announced today that his firm had made payments to beneficiaries of life insurance policies this last week larger in total dollar amount than those made any other week in the company's forty-seven-year history. Contributing to the size of these payments, Bergman said, was a payment of $150,000 made today to a local woman, Mrs. Carol Malden, of 4915 Larchmont Road. Mr. Bergman indicated that in addition to the sums constantly being paid to local residents who are beneficiaries under Acme policies, the company also makes substantial local investments with its premium money.

Malden rubbed his sweating palms against his trousers. It was almost too good to be true. His worries were over. Carol could find him a doctor, he could get his arm fixed, and then they would get out of the country. He would worry later about what to do with Carol. There was always the chance, the hope, he thought wistfully, that they could work things out.

He put the paper down and walked slowly over to the public phone in back next to the washroom. He dialed.

"Carol," he said hoarsely, "it's me. George."

But the sharpness of her retort made him wince. "You fool!" she hissed. "Get off this phone!"

"No," he said savagely, "my God, no!" He paused as a sailor walked by on his way to the washroom. "You've got the money, haven't you?"

Her answering laugh was brittle and mocking. "Of course I don't. It may be months before I get it."

Damn her, he thought viciously, but he said, "Carol, I've got to see you somewhere. I'm almost out of money. And my arm." He felt a twinge of pain. "If I don't get to a doctor, I don't know what will happen."

"I know, darling. I think I've found one; he's supposed to be very reliable. I've made an appointment for tomorrow evening."

"I can't wait that long."

"But he can't see you before then."

"What's his name?"

She hesitated. "Anderson."

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"Anderson? I've never heard of him. What's his address?"

"He has a place out in the country. I'm supposed to get directions tomorrow on how to get there. It's all very secretive." "We'll have to arrange a meeting place for tomorrow night. I can pick you up at eight. Where?"

It didn't take much imagination, he thought bitterly, to see what she was up to, and a savage fury welled up within him. "I'll meet you at eight," he said grimly, "on the northeast corner of Blake and Fifth."

"Yes," she said, "I'll be there."

He hung up slowly, clutched his arm, and half-walked, half-staggered to the front of the small restaurant. Tears of pain and self-pity came to his eyes. How stupid did she think he was!

He heard vaguely the anxious, bullying voice of the boy behind the counter. "Hey, you goddamn deadbeat! You don't get outa here unless you pay for the chile. I'll call the cops."

Malden waved an arm weakly, dropped a fifty-cent piece on the counter and walked blindly onto the street.

He came to a pawnshop and stood irresolutely in front of it, staring at the jumbled display behind the dirt-streaked window; dusty cameras, guns, tarnished saxophones, cheap jewelry, and a battered accordion junked together like exhibits in a museum of fading hopes. Then, squaring his shoulders, he stepped boldly through the doorway.

The inside of the shop was shadowed and musty and quiet, cloyed with the solemn oppressiveness of a mortician's parlor. The wizened proprietor hobbled forward eagerly from a dark recess in back, taking up a position behind the counter for the familiar ritual. His wrinkled, parchment-gray skin hung loosely from his bony face and his thin white hands fluttered gently upwards, like butterflies ascending in a garden. "The whole store is yours, sir. Or perhaps you don't want to buy tonight. Perhaps you want to sell." He laughed feebly and his voice broke in a wracking cough.

George shivered imperceptibly, then fumbled in his pockets and brought out all the money he had left. "I want to buy a gun," he said grimly and pushed the crumpled bills across the countertop.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS NIGHTTIME NOW, and the jagged silhouettes of the downtown buildings rose toward the sky like the hulks of sunken ships resting on the ocean floor.

Shep Henderson stood with Nancy on the curb outside the Stardust

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Lounge, listening to the brassy clang of cymbals and the triggered roll of snaredrums coming through the open windows of an upstairs taxi dancehall and watching the teen-aged soldiers and sailors jitterbug by with gum-chewing hostesses in sleazy satin dresses. When the music stopped the dancing stopped, and then the girls collected another ticket and the raucous beat began again.

Nancy smiled wistfully. "It was a good dinner, Shep. Thanks."

"You earned it." He flagged a taxi. "Sorry I can't make it an evening."

"I know. You white hunters are all the same. You never want women along when you're on safari. Give me a call later if you feel like it."

She climbed into the cab and he walked up the street to his own car and drove to the Acme Building. A janitor was mopping the marble tile in the deserted lobby, and on the twentieth floor a cleaning woman was running a sweeper across the carpeting. A shaft of light glimmered faintly from the office of Martin Crass. Martin was in shirtsleeves and there was a wax-paper sandwich wrapper and an empty cardboard cup on the desktop. He looked up with a worried frown.

Shep sat on the edge of the desk, holding out the shoes Carol had given him. "You got the casts yet?"

Crass nodded and disappeared into the main office. In a minute he came back with white casts of the footprints Shep had found in the Sweeney farmyard. He placed the shoes on them. Shep watched, then cried triumphantly, "They fit!"

"Yeah. They fit." Martin walked to the window and stared out at the lights of the city. "Your ex-wife was down here this afternoon looking for you. She said you told her to come; it was supposed to be important. What was going on?"

"I wanted to get her out of the house, see if the private dick, Clump, followed her. He did. And if he did, I wanted him to know she came to this building. So he would report it to Malden."

Crass kept staring out the window. "I'm half-inclined to stop payment on the check. We're playing with dynamite now. They could get away with all that money just by booking passage on the next plane."

"We've been playing with dynamite ever since this thing started. But stopping payment won't do any good. Malden would never come out of hiding. Besides, Carol would sue us on the check. What chance would we have in front of a jury with Carol Malden on the other side? You think the jury would pay any attention to those footprints? Thousands of men can wear the same shoes."

Crass swung around, frowning. "I don't like this idea of sitting here, waiting for *Malden* to make the first move. We ought to be on the offensive."

"We are. I talked to McAllister. He's going to circulate Malden's picture and description. Also, I got a list of docs who would treat Malden without

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reporting it to the police. We can put some men on it in the morning. And as soon as I leave here, I'm going to pay Clump a visit. Malden probably retained him by telephone, gave him a phony name. But there's an outside chance Malden might have gone up to Clump's office to make the first contact. Clump might be willing to give us an affidavit. If we paid him enough."

"He might. On the other hand, he might pass everything you said on to Malden."

Shep grinned. "You think Clump's got ethics or something? He won't be passing on what I tell him."

"Maybe, maybe not. First, though, we'd better put a tail on Carol. If she's going to leave the country, at least let's know where she goes."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Shep picked up the phone book and thumbed through it looking for Clump's home address. When he had found it he said, "Clump has to sleep sometime. He ought to be home by now. I'll give you a call if I learn anything new. Where will you be, here?"

Crass sighed. "I guess so. I guess I got the habit bad, about thirty years ago."

Twenty minutes later Shep was parking his car in front of a dilapidated three-story apartment house near the packing houses. A smell of fertilizer hung in the air as if it had been there forever. He entered the building and had to light a match to read the names on the mailboxes. He climbed the creaking stairs and walked down a dark hallway to an apartment overlooking the alley. He knocked on the door.

A guarded voice said, "Yeah?"

"Open up, Clump. I've got business with you."

"Who is it?"

"You wouldn't know me. Open up."

There was a delay while Clump appeared to be making up his mind. The door opened a few inches and a thin, saurian, whisker-stubbled face peered through the crack. Hooded eyes measured him suspiciously. Then the door opened wide and Shep walked in. A calendar-girl nude thumbtacked to the far wall winked coyly. A card table under the window was set for dinner with a plate of pork and beans and a half-empty bottle of beer. A fan on the television set whirred monotonously.

Clump stood in the center of the room. "What do you want?" he said.

Shep sat down. "I might want to hire you. It depends."

"Yeah. On what?"

"On whether you can do the job."

"What job?"

"Supplying information."

Clump sat down, eyeing Shep warily. "I've seen you before somewhere."

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Shep leaned forward. "You've seen me before. You've seen me at Carol Malden's house. Sure, now you remember. You were about as inconspicuous as a sore thumb."

"Yeah, I know you. Henderson. You work for Acme Insurance Company."

Shep nodded. "Just the way I figured. You take the license number of every car stopping at the Malden house. You check the license number with the motor vehicle registration people and get the owner's name. You look up the owner's occupation in the city directory. For that you earn your fee. It checks."

Clump shoveled a forkful of beans into his mouth and washed it down with beer. "Is that a crime?"

"It could be. If you knew what you were doing. Who's your client?"

Clump laughed unpleasantly. "You tell me. You know it all."

Shep said, "You know who Carol Malden is?"

"A dame."

"Her husband died in a plane crash not too long ago. He carried a hundred and fifty thousand bucks of life insurance. I just gave her a check for the money this afternoon."

Clump bent over his plate greedily. "That so?"

"The only thing is," Shep said casually, "the husband might not be dead."

"That so?"

"I've got a photograph of the husband. Like to see it?"

"Why?"

"I thought maybe you were interested in photography, that's all. You look like a man who has interesting hobbies."

Clump held out a tobacco-stained hand. "Let's see it."

Shep took a photo of George Malden from his pocket. "Ever seen him before?"

Clump looked at it blankly. "Nope."

"A man could make himself a nice piece of change supplying information that led to the arrest of the person in that picture."

"If he's alive."

"Yeah, if he's alive. The right kind of information could bring the man about ten percent of the hundred and fifty."

"Why talk to me?"

"Why not? I've got nothing else to do tonight. You ever met your client? The one who's paying you to watch Carol Malden."

"I don't talk about my clients."

Shep smiled drily. "It's nice to see old-fashioned professional ethics these days." He reached for the photograph and put it back in his pocket. "You can give me a call if you change your mind. My number's in the book."

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Clump finished the beer. "You're kind of assuming a lot, Henderson. I got nothing to change my mind about."

Shep stood up. "Okay. Then you don't have anything to worry about."

"Worry about? What do you mean?"

Shep bit into the words savagely. "I mean what you think I mean, Clump. If it turns out Malden's your client, then you — now that you know what's going on — would be a party to the conspiracy. You know what you get for conspiracy in this state?"

Clump grinned sourly. "You wouldn't be trying to scare me, would you? Go on," Clump said, "beat it!"

Shep stepped into the hallway. He could hear television sets blaring and babies crying behind the thin walls and the shrill exchanges that went with family arguments.

Shep felt as if he had come to a dead end, as if the answers were slipping away. He had counted too much on Clump, and Clump was either unable or unwilling to help. He cursed silently. Time was running out.

Then he thought about his telephone call of this afternoon to Carol. She must be wondering why he hadn't been in touch with her since then if it were so important. He had better go around to see her now.

He put out his headlights as he turned onto her street and coasted to a stop under some trees a few houses away. He shut the door quietly and walked across the grass. Carol had the bedroom light on and he could see her silhouette moving around the room behind the curtains. He stood there a moment watching as she bent to remove her stockings. It was like a strip tease and her quick feline movements played erotically on his fancy, reminding him of other nights in other years when the same performance was only a prelude.

Suddenly the sound of a branch crackling triggered him into alertness. He peered into the darkness surrounding him on all sides. Then, behind, he heard the rustle of dry grass. He whirled quickly, saw nothing.

Slowly, stealthily, he crept toward the nearest tree. Without warning, a hunched stocky figure broke from behind it and started running in the opposite direction. Shep was too surprised to give chase. When he did start, it was too late. He could hear the man's feet padding across the grass but the moon was behind a cloud and Shep could see nothing.

He walked slowly back to Carol's house. He pushed the doorbell, letting it ring until he could hear her on the stairs. From the other side of the door she whispered, "Who is it?"

"Shep."

She turned a double lock and undid a nightchain, opening the door just enough to let him through. "What do you want?"

She stood uncertainly in the half-light from the stairs, like a figure from a

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dream confronted by reality. Her long blonde hair fell to her shoulders in waves and one hand clutched the bow of a tailored robe. Her breasts rose and fell quickly with her troubled breathing. "What do you want?" she said again.

His glance went to the locks and the nightchain. "What's the matter? You afraid of somebody?"

She forced a contemptuous smile. "Of course not. Why should I be?" She led him into the livingroom, flicking on the soft overhead lights and fussing nervously with the pillows of a backless couch. "If you're not afraid," Shep said, "you should be."

Her face paled. "What do you mean?"

"You just had somebody out front either-watching the house or trying to break in."

Her hand went to her throat. "Who was it?"

"He didn't stay around to introduce himself. I'll call the police."

"*No!*" she cried. "I mean, it's so silly. He's gone now, and anyhow, it was probably a boy, perhaps a prank of some kind."

"It wasn't a boy. Do you have any enemies?"

She managed to laugh. "What a question. You mean, do I have any friends, don't you?"

"Have it your way. I just came by to explain about this afternoon. I'm sorry I got called away after asking you to make a special trip downtown."

"What did you want me for?"

"There were some other papers I was supposed to have you sign. I'd forgotten them when I came to your house this afternoon. I wasn't supposed to let you have the check until they'd been signed. I wanted to get you down there to sign them before somebody asked me for them. Then, when I was called away, I didn't want to tell my secretary about it. You know how word gets around on these things."

"Do you have them now?"

"I haven't been back to the office. Would you come down first thing in the morning?"

"I'll try. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"You leaving?"

Her voice flirted with him. "Why? Interested?"

"Maybe. Only, I still have to work for a living."

"I know. You keep telling me. Did it ever occur to you, there are things you're missing?"

"Sure. South America, Venice, Paris, Madrid. I like them too. But I don't have a hundred and fifty thousand to see me through the winter."

"You'd be surprised," she said. "There isn't as much independence in it as you'd think."

"I'd be surprised all right. So would ninety percent of the population."

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"Don't be bitter. You don't *have* to work for nickels and dimes. What makes you do it?"

He grimaced. "Congenital dumbness, probably. I come from a long line of two-bit operators. The old man died owning a half-interest in a non-existent goldmine and a one thousand dollar life insurance policy. You don't retire to Florida on that."

She turned her back to him and bent over a decanter. "Let's quit sparring, Shep. Do you want to get out? Out of Acme, out of mediocrity?"

"I'm open to propositions. Good ones."

"There you go again, sparring. What's good, what's bad?"

"That's a philosophical question. You're not a philosopher. What's on your mind?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand dollars. What's on yours?"

"Who's sparring now?"

"All right," she said, "I'll tell you what's on yours. You didn't have to come around personally to tell me about those papers. You could have done it over the phone." She walked over to him. Her lips were inches from his. Her voice taunted him. "Go ahead, kiss me. It won't kill you."

He reached for her savagely and pulled her to him, mashing his lips against hers. Her arms crept around his neck and her breath came in quick, hot gasps. She pulled her mouth away, mocking him. "It's kind of incendiary, isn't it?"

He spoke through clenched teeth. "Keep fanning it, Carol. You might be able to start a small fire."

"Why do you make fun of me, Shep? Do you think I'm made of ice?"

The shrill jangling of the phone broke in on them, and Carol stiffened in his arms. Shep grinned. "Aren't you going to answer?"

She moved away from him, staring at the phone as if it hypnotized her. "No. No, it isn't important."

"You know who it is, then?"

She nodded absently. "It's Hart. He'll stop."

But the phone kept ringing. Carol paced restlessly. Finally it was too much for her. She lunged for the receiver and her voice echoed harshly. "Yes. Who is this?"

Her eyes widened. Her free hand clutched the back of a chair. She spoke in a whisper. "You'll have to call back. I'm busy now." She put the phone down quickly and smiled uncertainly. "Where were we?"

"I don't know. I think you had something you wanted to tell me."

Her glance went to the phone and then met his blandly. "No, I had nothing, Shep."

"My mistake. In that case I might as well move along."

Relief flooded her face but she made a mock grimace. "So soon? You just arrived."

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"Yeah, I know. You're sure you don't want to phone the cops? That prowler might come back."

"I've got a gun. One of George's. I know how to use it." She walked with him to the door, politely remote, as if she had never been in his arms less than two minutes ago. But he could feel the tenseness as she tried to get him out of the house before the phone rang again. It didn't take much imagination to guess who had been calling. She knew her husband was alive.

Her arm fell lightly on his as she opened the door. Something approaching regret seemed to lurk at the back of her eyes and she seemed to want to tell him something. Then she shrugged and ushered him into the night. The phone started ringing even before the door was closed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Somehow Carol Malden got through the night, and although she knew the locks were changed, although she knew George had no way to get in the house, the eerie creaking of floors and rafters kept her in a state of near panic until daybreak. If she was going to panic at strange noises in the night, she had no business going through with her plan. But she *was* going through with it. There would be no turning back now.

If the plan went wrong — and that could happen — she would keep her head, because panic would destroy her. That was what worried her about Hart. She needed his help, but she had no illusions about his dependability in a crisis. He drew his courage from her, not from any inner resources. Well, she would have to have enough for them both.

Momentarily she forgot all these problems and concentrated on getting ready to go downtown. As soon as she was dressed she intended to buy some new clothes, then she would go to the bank and cash the check, and then she would get together with Hart and go over their plan.

As the plan now stood, this evening she would drive to Fifth and Blake to keep her appointment with George. Hart would be hidden under a blanket on the floor of the back seat. George would get in beside her and she would drive out to the country, ostensibly taking him to the doctor's. When they came to the Lonesome Valley road, she would stop the car and Hart would take care of the rest. She smiled, for she had thought of everything, right down to having Hart do the actual shooting. That way, if something went wrong — not that it would — Hart would be the person responsible. A good lawyer and an understanding jury would, one way or another, keep her out of too much trouble. Besides, it gave her a hold over Hart. She expected to need it.

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She felt dissatisfaction with the plan, but time was too short to do any better. They had to kill George. Then they had to get rid of the body so efficiently that it would never be found. There was an old quarry, now filled with quicksand and water, on the Lonesome Valley road. George Malden would find his final resting place in the quarry.

It was a crude plan, but it was workable, and it could be carried out tonight. That was the most important feature, because there was no telling what George might do if he were left at large any longer. Last night, when he phoned while Shep was there and then again a few minutes later, he had acted like an insane man. Perhaps, by now, he was.

She took a last sip of coffee, snuffed out her cigarette, and went downstairs to the garage. She flicked the electric switch for the overhead doors, backed down the drive, and headed into town, making her first stop at Chilson's Department Store.

She hurried to the Women's Shop on the third floor with a childish glee. It would be just like Christmas. Anything she liked, she would buy. She walked through an expanse of mirrors, cream walls and gray carpeting to the Holiday Room. She had almost forgotten what it was like to buy clothes without worrying about price tags. She asked to see beachwear, cocktail dresses and lingerie, and then settled luxuriously in one of the deep couches while the models paraded by and a plump saleswoman whispered in her ear.

Two hours later she had finished and was on her way out of the store, but as she was walking through Men's Furnishings on the ground floor, she noticed a sterling comb-and-brush set. It might be just the kind of touch Hart would like. She hesitated, trying to catch the eye of a clerk, and then as she waited, she became aware of somebody calling her name. She turned, not recognizing the stooped elderly man who was approaching.

"Mrs. Malden," he began apologetically, "I'm Mr. Wilson. I'm in charge of the Shoe Department." He smiled sadly. "It was a terrible shock, Mrs. Malden, reading about the crash. Mr. Malden was a fine man and one of our best customers. I used to see the two of you down here together all the time, it seemed."

She smiled an acknowledgment and waited for him to leave. But he seemed determined to stay. Finally he coughed to cover his confusion. "I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs. Malden, for butting in this way. It's just that something peculiar happened down here a few days ago."

"Oh," she said without interest.

He looked at her with the slightest trace of annoyance. "It concerns Mr. Malden."

She raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Malden?"

"Yes. A man from Acme Insurance Company came in here and wanted to know what size shoes your husband wore. After Mr. Malden was dead, mind you."

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Be calm, Carol whispered to herself, be calm. She steadied herself against a showcase. "This man, this insurance man. What did he look like?"

"Well, he was tall, his hair was getting gray, but he wasn't too old . . ."

"Did he tell you his name?"

The old man nodded somberly. "It was Henderson, Mrs. Malden. I made a note of it."

Carol's smile was sickly. Words came out mechanically. "It was very nice of you to tell me all this, Mr. Wilson. Thank you, and good-bye."

She staggered out onto the street and fought an impulse to run or to jump into the first taxi she saw, and grimly, digging her nails into her palms, she made herself continue down the street. She turned into a drugstore and pushed her way to the phone booths in back. She called Hart's office but he was out. "This is Mrs. Malden," she said. "Tell him I want to see him at my house as soon as he can get there. It's *urgent*."

Out on the street again she hurried towards the bank.

She kept walking until she came to the bank, pushing her way through the revolving door with a new determination.

She asked a wizened guard where she could find Mr. Jonas, hoping that Mr. Jonas would remember her from the one time they had met. He did, and he listened patiently while Carol showed him the check and told him she had to have the money immediately.

When she had finished, he rubbed his thin fingers together and tried to explain to her the way the banking system operated. "But Mrs. Malden," he said, "this is a check on a New York bank. It would have to clear there before we could advance funds on it." He sighed quietly and sucked on his unlit pipe. "Not that the check isn't good, Heaven forbid. But bankers are bankers, and . . ."

"But I need the money and I need it now."

He shrugged. "It has to clear. That's all there is to it."

She leaned forward earnestly. "Can't you wire New York or phone? At my expense. You can confirm the fact that the check is good and that the insurance company has enough money to pay it."

"Yes, perhaps we could. But even so, we can't dig up a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash on the spur of the moment. We'll probably need a week to get that much liquid cash."

"I'll need it before then. I'm leaving the country."

"But surely you don't have to have the actual cash. We could advance about ten thousand if it were an emergency. The rest we could credit to your account, subject to a full cash withdrawal at the end of a week."

She shook her head obstinately. A week was too long. It gave Acme too much time. If they stumbled on the right kind of evidence, they could tie up her bank account. She knew how they operated; Shep had told her too many times. But if she were out of the country and had *all* the money

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with her, it would be almost impossible for them to do anything, for again, she could remember stories Shep had told her about the inadequacy of the extradition treaties. She pressed her point: "If you had a good customer whose child, let's say, was kidnaped, and the kidnapers wanted ransom, you could get the money in a hurry. Couldn't you?"

Mr. Jonas regarded her shrewdly. "You're a very persistent woman. And also a very informed one. Where did you learn so much about the ins and outs of banking?"

She smiled, putting her hand impulsively on his arm, "Then you will get it for me?"

"I won't promise anything. But I'll try." He stood up. "I'll phone you as soon as I have anything to report."

"Thank you, Mr. Jonas. George always spoke so highly of you. I know you'll do everything you can."

But as soon as she was on the street again, her assurance vanished. Maybe the bank was working with the insurance company. Maybe the insurance company had told the bank to delay the processing of the check. Maybe they were waiting for her to lead them to George.

She shivered, and then, as she stood on the corner waiting for the light to change, she saw a thin, hawk-nosed man loitering in a building entrance across the street. She gasped, for she recognized the face. She had seen it twice before this morning, once in Chilson's and once outside the drugstore. *She was being followed.*

She stood there uncertainly and then, making a quick decision, flagged a taxi. "Acme Insurance Building," she said, settling back against the sticky leather and staring up through the open skylight at the storm clouds moving in over the city. Rain, she thought, rain was what they needed. All the lawns, all the flowers, were dying.

The receptionist on the twentieth floor told her she could go right back to Mr. Henderson's office, and Shep was waiting for her in the doorway. The lines around his mouth seemed harder this morning and there was a bitter edge to his voice. "I began to think you weren't coming."

She sat down in a chair against the wall where he could see her legs. Her legs, he had told her once, were her best feature. Now she crossed them, hiking the skirt carelessly. "We had some unfinished business. I don't like unfinished business." She raised her eyebrows, challenging him. And you know something? I have a feeling you'd like to keep me poor. I've got another feeling too. That somebody's following me. And that this *somebody* works for Acme. Why are you having me followed, Shep?"

He looked at her blankly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll bet. You might as well tell him he's wasting his time. I haven't any secrets." She hesitated, hoping she could draw him out. But he remained obstinately noncommittal and she had to give up. She finished signing the

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papers. "This may be the last time we see each other. Can we shake hands?"

He put out his hand. "Is it going to be the *last* time, Carol?"

"What do you mean?"

He frowned, and then as if yielding to an impulse, said, "If you're in any kind of trouble, I'd like to help. I might be able to now when I couldn't later."

Evasively she said, "Trouble? What kind of trouble would *I* be in?"

"That would be up to you to decide, Carol."

She avoided his eyes, sure now of what she had only suspected before. He did know about George. What was more, he wanted her to know that he knew. It was part of his plan to make her panic. But she was not going to panic. The stakes were too high.

"Thank you," she said blandly. "I'll keep it in mind."

She let him escort her to the elevators and took a taxi back to the parking lot where she had left her car. Nobody, as far as she could tell, was following her now. She drove home slowly, wondering how much of what had happened she should tell Hart.

He was already there, waiting in his car, when she turned into the driveway. She went through the house and opened the front door for him. "Well, darling," she said lightly, "such reluctance. Why didn't you use your key?"

He stepped inside quickly. "For a very obvious reason. There's been a man parked down the street. I'm sure he's watching the house."

She paled, clutching his arm involuntarily. "A tall thin man?"

He shook his head. "Just the opposite. But why? Is somebody else following you?"

She grimaced. "Brace yourself, Hart. Shep thinks George is alive."

"*What!*"

"I was in Chilson's this morning. An old man who works in the Shoe Department spoke to me. Shep had been in there after the plane crash, asking what size shoes George wore."

"His shoe size! Why?"

"I don't know. But not just because he had nothing better to do."

"How would Henderson even know that George used to buy his shoes at Chilson's?"

"I don't know that either. Wait a minute, yes, I do. It was the first day Shep came out here. He led the conversation around to George's clothes, what he wore, where he bought them."

"You told him! My God, Carol, you should have had more sense!"

"Oh, I should, should I! And how was I to know that?"

Hart groaned. His voice complained bitterly. "And the next day you gave him a pair of George's shoes. Right while I was here. I knew *something* funny was going on." Hart snapped his fingers. "You know, there could have been footprints at the scene of the crash. It was muddy that night."

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Carol nodded quickly. "Yes . . . yes, of course. That *must* be it." She covered her alarm by reaching for a cigarette and then lighting it with an elaborately casual gesture. "It explains the tall thin man I saw outside the bank. I'm sure he was following me and he probably works for Acme. But I don't know who the one you saw could be."

"Probably another Acme man, assigned to the house instead of you. I don't like it."

"Understatement of the week. But I might as well give you all the bad news. The bank won't cash the check until it clears through New York. It might take seven days to get all the money. I was hoping we could get out of town after tonight."

He turned on her angrily but the unexpected ringing of the doorbell cut short his reply. His chin trembled. "What's that?"

"A doorbell," she snapped impatiently. "See who it is."

Hart peered out the window. He turned to her, his eyes glassy. "*It's the man I saw!* The one who was parked down the street."

She laughed unsympathetically. "Let him in."

Hart gave her a bitter look and squared his shoulders mechanically, like a man drawing on the slim remains of a vanishing self-respect. He crossed the room and opened the door slowly, saying, "Yes. What do you want?"

The visitor barged into the house. His furtive eyes, set deep in a sallow face, took in everything at once and he grinned through yellowed teeth. "I'll talk to the lady of the house, thanks."

"I'm her lawyer," Hart said. "You can talk to me."

"If I want to," the man sneered, "if I want to."

He skirted Hart nimbly and advanced into the livingroom. He bowed sardonically to Carol and sat down without an invitation. He ran his fingers over the upholstery and his eyes roved the room. "Nice," he said insolently. "Whattya gonna do with the house?"

Carol said icily, "All right, who are you?"

The man smiled, enjoying his role. "My name's Tracy Clump. But it wouldn't mean anything to you."

Hart said, "What do you do for a living, Clump? Besides making yourself obnoxious."

Clump fished in his pocket for a cigar and sniffed it critically. "I guess you could say I was an opportunist, Mr. McIntire."

"Oh, you know my name, do you?"

Clump jerked a thumb in McIntire's direction. "You want him here while we talk? It ain't gonna be pretty."

Carol said, "Why don't you get on with your business, Mr. Clump?"

Clump bit the tip off his cigar. He pretended to be studying it. "I'll give you my credentials, Mrs. Malden. First of all, you just got a check for a hundred and fifty grand from Acme Life Insurance Company. Second, I

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been watching every move you made the last week. Third, a man named Henderson — yeah, you know him — came to my place last night and offered me ten percent of that hundred and fifty if I could give him information proving your husband was still alive." He clamped the cigar between his teeth and glared ferociously. "Do we talk?"

Carol stared at him expressionlessly. "Go on, Mr. Clump."

Clump said, "Henderson showed me a picture of your husband. It looked a lot like a client of mine." He grinned smugly. "As a matter of fact, it looked like the man who came into my office about a week ago and paid me to keep an eye on you." Clump raised a hand in a restraining gesture. "Mind you, I'm not saying it was. It just looked like him."

"Just what are you driving at?"

"I got a simple proposition, folks. I want half of the hundred and fifty grand and I want it tonight. Otherwise I give Henderson an affidavit identifying my client. I guess you can figure out what would happen after that."

Carol sat stiffly against the back of the couch. Her eyes were closed and her face was white. "Mr. Clump," she said tonelessly, "my husband couldn't be alive. Why do you come here and torture me with a story like that? What kind of sadist are you? If you think he's alive, then in the name of everything that's decent, tell me where I can find him. And furthermore, if you think he's alive, I suggest you contact the insurance company immediately."

"You don't have to suggest nothing to me, Mrs. Malden. I know who to contact."

"Carol," Hart said slowly, "Mr. Clump described himself rather aptly when he called himself an opportunist. As your lawyer, I should advise you that he has a certain nuisance value. He could make an affidavit of the type he describes, and even though the affidavit was a complete lie, it might delay your getting the insurance money for months. I think you might take under advisement the possibility of giving him, say fifty or a hundred dollars, just to save yourself a little trouble."

"That's a lawyer talking all right," Clump spat contemptuously. "You two-faced bastard, who do you think you're kidding?" He leaned forward savagely, poking his cigar at them like a gun. "I'm a cheap two-bit operator, sure, but I'm not dumb. I got an education you don't get in books, or in bathing suits either, Mrs. Malden. So you want to hand out that kind of doubletalk, you'd better hand it out somewhere else." He pointed a grimy finger at Carol. "Why should you kick? You got yours, now I want mine. I go to Henderson, and you got nothing. I do business with you, and you still got seventy-five grand." He stood up, surly and defiant. "I'll give you until six tonight. Otherwise you can kiss it all good-bye."

Hart blustered, "This is fantastic! Do you know we could have you put in jail?"

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Clump took a soiled business card from his pocket. He flicked it derisively in Hart's direction. "Go ahead. There's my address. It'll make it easier for the cops to find me."

He swaggered from the room, hesitating briefly at the door. "Remember, I got no time to argue with you. We make a deal by six or I go to Henderson."

Carol and Hart watched from the window as he strolled down the flagstone walk.

Carol turned desperately to Hart. "Can't we buy him off?"

"Sure. He'd only get fifteen thousand from Henderson. So twenty thousand from us would keep him happy. But for how long?" He shook his head. "He'd never let us go. We could change our names, dye our hair, wear disguises; he'd always be there, waiting for us in dark corners of hotel lobbies, pushing in beside us as we climbed into taxis, looking at us with that slimy, insolent grin and holding out his hand for more, more . . ." He shrugged. "What good would it do, even, to give him seventy-five thousand? He'd still come back for more. Blackmailers always do."

"He's bluffing," Carol said. "He must be."

"The trouble is, we can't afford to call the bluff, can we?"

"No," she said, "we can't." She walked across the room to the liquor cabinet. She poured two glasses of whisky and gave him one. She downed the other quickly. "I don't care what we have to do, Hart. I want the money. I can't let it go." She gave a short, almost hysterical laugh. "Two murders really aren't any different than one."

He backed away from her, his face ashen. "You're not serious."

"The way you act, you seem to be frightened."

He laughed, bitterly. "I'm frightened, all right. Henderson knowing about George — that's one thing — but when somebody like this Clump knows, it makes you wonder. How many other people know? When does it ever end? Do we have to go through life expecting every knock on the door to be another Tracy Clump?"

"Maybe we can get him to extend his deadline."

"Not a chance. In order to get him to extend his deadline, we'd have to make some kind of admission that George was alive. But we can't afford to do that; for all we know, Clump might be working with Henderson." He held out his glass. His hand shook. "Give me another."

"One thing about whisky, it gives you courage."

"It's not courage," he said wryly, "but it's a good substitute." He laughed cynically. "Keep feeding it to me. I might surprise us both yet."

She handed him a new drink and stood close to him. "I'm proud of you, Hart. I really am. And one thing I'm sure of. Nothing can stop us."

He remarked tiredly. "Let's get down to brass tacks, Carol. What *is* in it for me?"

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"Half the money and . . . me." She took his hand and pulled him down on the couch. "If we're willing to go as far as killing George . . . does it make any difference if we kill Clump too? Does it, Hart, does it?"

He shuddered and gulped his drink. "I guess not. As a matter of fact, I know where I can get a gun with a silencer."

She pressed against him. "I knew I could count on you, Hart."

"Yeah," he said, eyeing her strangely, "I guess you did."

"Hart," she asked, "does it make you feel peculiar, frightened? Sitting here talking about murder as if we were arranging a cocktail party." She closed her eyes. "It makes me feel," she said, pausing momentarily while she searched for words, "it makes me feel . . . important. For the first time in my life, I feel important."

CHAPTER NINE

SHEP HENDERSON BIT SAVAGELY on his pipe stem, cursing under his breath the cringing, hawk-faced man who sat on the other side of his desk.

"Honest, Shep," the man was repeating, "I kept half a block behind her all the time. Lots of people between me and her. I don't know how she saw me. When she came out of the bank, something just made her start looking around."

Shep waved the man away wearily. "Okay, let's not keep rehashing it."

The man wandered off forlornly and Shep went next door to Martin's office. He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Carol knows we're on her trail. She spotted Harvey when he was tailing her."

Crass frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. What about the doctors? How are you doing with them?"

"Jackson's seen about ten so far. Surly bastards, all of them. Most of them wouldn't talk; the ones who did denied treating a patient with a bullet wound during the past week. I told Jackson to skip the rest."

The phone rang and Crass picked it up. "For you," he said.

Shep sat down by the desk. "Hello."

"This is Calhoun, Shep."

"Yeah."

"I called as soon as I was relieved. Smith's taken over at the house."

"Okay."

"Mrs. Malden got back about an hour ago. Then guess who dropped in?"

"Santa Claus."

"Your friend, Clump. He stayed about ten minutes. The lawyer was there the whole time."

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"Thanks, Jim. That helps." A smile flitted across Shep's face as he hung up. "Well, now *we've* had a break. Clump's been paying his respects to Carol."

Crass shrugged. "I could give you about ten explanations for his calling on her. They'd all stand up."

"Sure. But there's only one logical one. The idea I put in his head last night has been fermenting. He's trying to blackmail her."

"It's a possibility. But I'm not sure how much good the information does us. If Carol's going to pay Clump off, she'll be smart about it. She'll sure as hell get rid of any tail we have on her."

"That's why I want to have another talk with Clump. I think I can get somewhere with him this time."

"He won't sing."

"He'll sing if I put the pressure on. He'll sing like a bluebird in springtime."

"Don't count on that. Big stakes put muscles into the guts."

"I'll take the chance."

"So I see." Crass grinned sourly. "Only, you keep forgetting, it's Acme's money you're taking the chance with."

"What's the alternative?"

"Patience. In other words, keeping a tail on Carol. Putting one on Clump."

"But she knows we're there. And Clump will be smart enough to keep his eyes open."

"He'll keep them open a lot wider if you talk to him again." The lines of worry on his face deepened. "It's no deal. I don't want you making contact with Clump."

"Is that an order?"

"That's a blunt way of putting it, but that's what it is, all right."

"You're the boss."

"Sometimes I wonder." Crass sighed. "Except that I've got ulcers to prove it."

Shep stood up. "I guess that's it then."

Crass raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You must be reforming. You mean, you're giving in that easily?"

Shep grinned. "I was just respecting your gray hairs. I was still going to visit Clump. But I wasn't going to spoil your afternoon by telling you."

Crass rubbed a hand over his bullet-shaped bald head. "That's what I thought. How you guys jump when I crack the whip. Okay, go ahead and talk to him. If it backfires, I knew nothing about it. I've still got a pension I'm working toward. A youngster like you probably doesn't even know what a pension is."

"Thanks, Martin."

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"Don't thank me. But pray for me sometimes. Or are you on the side of the angels?" He picked up some papers and shuffled through them. "Go on, beat it! Do it any way you want, but get the money back. I'll station a man at Clump's apartment. Just in case you lose him. Not, of course, that you will."

Shep tossed him a mock salute and left the room quickly.

He drove through the city to the north end of the Blake Street slums where Clump had his office, parked his car and crossed the street to the Burns Building, an ancient, soot-smeared firetrap squeezed between a pool hall and a pawnshop.

He climbed five flights of stairs and felt his way along a dank corridor in the semi-darkness to Clump's office. Clump peered up at him suspiciously, and then, as he recognized his visitor, his lips curled in a snarl. "What's the big idea, barging in like that? I don't have to take a bloody nothing from you, Henderson."

"Nobody said you did." Shep sat down on a dusty chair and glanced around the miserable little room.

"You must not of heard me last night. Why don't you beat it?"

Shep grinned. "How come you aren't out watching your client's wife, like you were paid to? That job too small time now?"

Clump's eyes glinted dangerously. "Whattya mean?"

"I can't figure you out, Clump. Are you stubborn or just plain stupid? Don't you think we know enough about our job to watch Carol Malden's house too? We saw you go in today. We know what you talked about."

"Yeah? What did we talk about?"

"Your share of the hundred and fifty grand."

"Says you."

"That's right. Says me. But I intend to prove it too, so why don't you get on the right side? You make yourself fifteen grand and you make it legal. The other way you end up serving time. You're smart enough to know that."

Clump snorted. "I'm not smart at all, Henderson." His hand indicated the room contemptuously. "A smart operator wouldn't be in a dive like this, would he? You got me mixed up with somebody else. It so happens I'm a very dumb kind of a guy. I'm so dumb I don't see or hear nothing."

"What were you talking to Mrs. Malden about?"

Clump laughed. "That's kind of a sixty-four dollar question, isn't it?"

Shep reached in his billfold and took out five hundred-dollar bills. He laid them carefully on the desk. "It's a five-hundred dollar question, Clump."

Clump's hooded eyes fed greedily on the money and he spoke without conviction. "Maybe she hired me to do a job. I told you last night, I don't talk about my clients."

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"Not for five hundred bucks?"

"You're coming down a lot from fifteen thousand."

"That's what you get when we find Malden."

"You got correspondents in Heaven, maybe?"

Shep leaned forward. His eyes bored into Clump's. "You might get killed. Did you ever figure that? What if they don't want to buy you off? You think they're going to leave you around so you can come running to me for the consolation prize?"

Clump's pasty face turned a shade whiter. "I told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're making a mistake, Clump. You'll never get any money from them, unless it's for flowers at your funeral." He retrieved the five hundred dollars and stood up. He waited a moment, hoping Clump would change his mind. But Clump was no longer interested. His hand was already reaching for a Racing Form on a corner of the desk.

By the time he reached the lobby the rain was coming down in torrents. He checked carefully to make sure there was no rear exit and then darted across the street to his car and took up a watch of the building entrance. A minute later a car horn honked alongside him and he turned, startled. It was a taxi and a woman was getting out. She started rapping on his window. It was Nancy. "Hello, Shep," she laughed, "move over."

She slid in beside him, wet and a little breathless. Her black hair glistened from the rain and her thin, soaked summer dress clung to her like a bathing suit. "Don't act so happy to see me," she pouted.

"How'd you get here?"

"Ah." Her eyes crinkled. "You're not the only one who can play detective. I've been watching the Acme Building all day, waiting for something to happen. The way you tore out a little while ago, you had to be on to something." She bent over and removed her shoes, shaking water out. "After all, I have some kind of obligation to the city editor. He did run that fake story for you, remember?"

"You shouldn't have come."

"I shouldn't, but I did. Aren't you a little bit glad?"

He groaned. "What a hell of a time to pick to be coy!" He pointed to the Burns Building. "You know who's in there?"

She said lightly, "I'm consumed with curiosity. Malden?"

"No, but the man who might lead me to Malden. He's a private detective. I think Malden hired him to watch Carol. I also think he's trying to blackmail Carol. I was up there a few minutes ago. But he sent me packing."

She grimaced. "I'm a poor liar, Shep. I guess I should tell you why I really came."

"I can guess."

"Don't. Let me tell you." She snuggled against him. "I was worried

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about you. And jealous too, I guess. I don't like anything about this case."

"Because of Carol?"

"Yes. Because of Carol."

"I don't feel anything about her."

"But you want to help her, don't you?"

"I don't know." There was a note of hostility in his voice. "Let's skip it."

She winced. "All right. It's none of my business. Tell me what's been happening."

Shep stared at the bleak gray building. His voice was listless. "I tried to get this private detective to talk because I think he's seen Malden alive. I went around to his place last night and showed him Malden's photograph. I put a bee in his bonnet about getting a reward if he helped me. But he clammed up." He stared moodily into the rain, listening to its steady machine-gun spatter on the rooftop. "Today he called on Carol. It must have been to see what she would offer him. When I was up in his office a few minutes ago I tried to buy him again and I tried to scare him. Both moves were a mistake. He's riding high on money dreams and he's too excited to be scared. He thinks he can get a better cut from Carol."

"He probably can."

"Maybe. But with hundred and fifty thousand dollar stakes, he has a better chance of ending up on a slab."

She grasped his arm instinctively. "You're not going to let them kill him, are you?"

"What business is it of mine?"

"Is that what you're sitting here waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for a pay-off. It could be in money or it could be in bullets. But I don't think it'll be here. Malden's smarter than that, Carol's smarter than that, and so's Clump — the detective. They'll meet somewhere, and I want to be on hand when they do."

"I think you should go to the police."

"Then I know we wouldn't get the money back. They'd start a big investigation. Malden would go so far underground we'd never find him."

"Getting the money is one thing. The possibility of murder, murder which you can actually anticipate, is something else."

"Clump'll be all right. As long as he doesn't try to get away from me."

She looked at him searchingly. "Sometimes your self-confidence is frightening."

He didn't answer. From the corner of his eye he had seen a raincoated figure slip into the Burns Building. The back of the man's head and the sloping shoulders were vaguely familiar; not Malden's, of course, but someone he knew. He sat there a minute thinking. Suddenly recognition dawned. McIntire, it was Hart McIntire. That meant there was to be a money payoff; McIntire, whatever else he might be, wasn't a gunman.

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Shep turned his coat collar up and splashed across the street. He stopped in front of the building, signaling frantically to Nancy to follow. If he was going to be eavesdropping on a blackmail payoff, he needed another witness to corroborate his story of what went on between McIntire and Clump. What went on, he was sure, would establish the fact that Malden was alive.

Nancy was beside him now. "I think Malden's lawyer just went in the building. Come on." He hesitated at the foot of the stairs. There was no sound. McIntire must be on the fifth floor already. They started climbing stealthily, trying to stifle the telltale squishing of their shoes. They were almost to the fifth floor when they heard two weak pops, like the harmless sputtering of wet firecrackers. Nancy clutched his arm. "What is it?"

The pounding of feet in the hallway drowned his answer. Almost before they knew it, a man hurtled by. It was McIntire. The agonized expression on his face, a mixture of nausea and terror, was indication enough that he had recognized Shep. But panic spurred him on, kept him going. Shep, torn by the instinctive urge to give chase and the uncertainty of the moment, stood there indecisively. Then he leapt forward, racing the length of the hall to Clump's office. A corpse with frozen eyes stared back hideously.

Shep whirled and sped down the hall. He saw Nancy's white face pleading with him as he raced by. He took the stairs three at a time. When he reached the street, McIntire had vanished. The sky, ominously black, had made the late afternoon as dark as night. Shep swore under his breath, scanning the street for the killer. A block away, through the downpour, he could see a man trying to start a car.

Shep ran toward the car, jerking his gun from its holster and shouting to the man in the car. As he got closer he could see the almost insane look of desperation on the man's face. The man's hand moved rapidly back and forth; he was trying to prime the engine. But the engine refused to respond. The man looked up frantically, his eyes glazed by panic. Suddenly he threw the door open and ran into the mist. Shep took up the chase, moving guardedly from doorway to doorway. Any minute now McIntire would realize something that, in his panic he must have forgotten — that Shep was a witness who could put him in the chair.

Shep raised his voice in a command to stop, listening to its muffled echo in the narrow, twisting alleyway down which McIntire had gone. McIntire paused, as if trying to decide between impossible alternatives, and then sped off again. Unexpectedly he came to a dead end. He spun around defiantly, waiting with a savage, cornered fanaticism for the sound of footsteps. Shep cried from the shadows, "Come on out, McIntire. It's your only chance."

McIntire laughed boldly, like a man trying to die bravely in a bad cause. He pumped bullets into the darkness and Shep could hear the whine of lead

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spraying the brick inches above his head. Shep edged closer, waiting for McIntire to use up his ammunition. He did not have to wait long. He heard the lawyer curse and then his voice cried out bitterly, "All right, I'm coming out. Don't shoot."

"Drop your gun then," Shep ordered him.

"There's nothing in it," McIntire said and began walking slowly down the center of the alley, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Shep took cover behind a telephone pole, not quite able to see whether the gun was still in McIntire's hand. They were less than twenty feet apart. Shep stepped into the open. "Okay, that's far enough. Turn around! Raise your hands!"

McIntire raised his hands slowly. Suddenly his gun blazed. Shep dropped to his knees, blasting at McIntire's silhouette. The silhouette teetered precariously, then fluttered helplessly to the ground, face down in the storm waters raging through the alley. Nancy appeared unexpectedly at Shep's side. "You've killed him," she whispered.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "That's right. I've killed him." He turned the body over with his foot so that McIntire's face, boyish and helpless now in death, stared unseeingly at the sky. He said, "It wasn't hard. We were less than twenty feet apart when I got him."

"And the man in the building? Did he have to die too?"

Already in the distance there was the low banshee wail of sirens. Lightning flashed symbolically and thunder rolled across the sky like Death's regimental drums. Shep took Nancy's arm. "You don't want to look at this. Let's get out of here."

She followed him mechanically. He could feel her arm trembling through the wet silk. "Nancy?" he said.

She stared blankly ahead. "Yes."

"I want to ask you a favor. I don't want the police to know why we were here. It would ruin everything."

"*Ruin everything!*" She jerked her arm away and her eyes flashed. "You're still trying to protect Carol, aren't you? You're trying to keep her out of this. That's why you don't want to tell the police. Go ahead, admit it." Her voice broke in a sob. "I don't care."

CHAPTER TEN

WITH SHAKING HANDS Carol Malden poured herself another drink, swallowing it quickly like a bitter medicine. Her eyes darted frantically from the glass to the clock; she did not know what to do.

It was already after eight, and eight o'clock was the time she and Hart

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were supposed to meet George. But there had been no word from Hart since he left a few hours ago.

She put her hands to her face, fighting an almost irresistible urge to scream. She had only two choices: she could stay in the house and wait, or she could meet George by herself, without Hart. But if she waited any longer for Hart to come, she ran the risk of George's doing something desperate. If his bullet wound was bad enough, he might even give himself up. On the other hand, if she went to meet him by herself, she would have to — she hesitated, numbed by the starkness of the alternative — she would have to kill him by *herself*. Unless she could somehow reason with him, pacify him, stall him another day. Yet she had already promised him she would have a doctor ready. Would he listen to any more excuses?

There was really no choice. She would have to go. The risk of what might happen if she didn't go was greater than the risk of what might happen if she did. There was no other way. She ran upstairs and took George's gun from a bureau drawer, checking it quickly to be sure it was loaded, and put it in her purse.

She picked up a raincoat at the foot of the stairs and went out to the garage. She dropped the purse on the seat and slid behind the wheel. Then she hesitated. The gun would do her no good *in* the purse. It would take too long to get at it if she needed it. But where could she put it? Her left hand went unconsciously to the seat-adjusting mechanism near the floor, and she smiled. She knew where to put the gun: on her left between the seat and the door. If she needed it in a hurry she could reach it without George's seeing her. Of course, she told herself again, she was not going to need it; she could handle George in other ways . . .

She backed down the driveway and headed into the night and the rain, watching the crazy dancing of headlights in the rear-view mirror. It didn't take long to spot the car which was following her, and she accelerated, trying to lose it. But the driver of the other car, realizing that he had been identified, abandoned any efforts to keep hidden. His car surged forward with hers in a careening chase.

An intersection light changed from green to caution and she tried to sneak through, but a parked car swerved out suddenly, blocking her. She looked in the mirror. The Acme man was right behind her.

Her glance went to the street corner and she saw a policeman making a report at a call-box. She tried to catch his eye but he was turned away from her. Impulsively, she blew the horn. Nothing happened. She tried again, keeping it depressed. The policeman turned and she waved frantically. He shrugged and ambled slowly toward her. As he came closer she could see the beefy, weather-beaten face of a middle-aged Irishman.

He leaned on her windowsill. "Well now, young lady, what's bothering you this rainy night?"

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She smiled appealingly and put her hand on his arm in a gesture of helplessness. "Officer," she whispered, "I'm being followed by a . . . a . . ." Her voice faltered appropriately . . . "a masher."

He peered into the rain. "Back there?"

She nodded. "The man right behind me."

The tough lines of his face broke in a reassuring grin. "All right, Miss, you drive on." He squared his shoulders. "I'll see what he's got to say for himself."

Carol waited until he was at the window of the other car. Then she made a sharp left turn in front of the oncoming traffic. She could see the two of them engaged in a heated exchange and the protesting driver handing over his wallet and identification. She turned left at the next intersection, doubling back on her tracks and checking for other cars behind her. This time she was safe.

She turned again and drove toward the rendezvous. She pulled into a taxi parking zone on the northeast corner of Fifth and Blake and waited.

The minutes went by. Nervously she dropped her left hand to where it was touching the gun. It was a kind of reassurance, but not enough. She raced the motor, almost ready to leave. Then a rapping on the right window made her jump. She gasped. Pressed against the pane was the stark, leering image of her husband's face. He rattled the door handle and she leaned across to unlock it. He slipped into the car. "Start driving," he said tersely.

George laughed bitterly. "My little Carol. I knew I could count on her."

She bit her lip. "How's your bullet wound, George?"

He clutched his arm, allowing himself the briefest interlude of unspoken self-pity. "The doctor ready?"

"Yes," she said helplessly, "he's ready."

"Where's he live?"

"On the Lonesome Valley Road." From the corner of her eye she saw him pressing his hand against the left side of his chest. His face was twisted in agony. "What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing," he gasped. "Keep driving."

"You're sweating."

"It's the rain." He mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "It's too damn bad for you I had to turn up alive, isn't it?"

"Why do you have to say something like that? I'm here, aren't I? Let's not fight."

"You never loved me, did you?"

"Oh, grow up!" she snapped. "What are we here for, a family argument? This is ridiculous. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars at stake and we quibble about nothing."

"Nothing to you, perhaps. Something else to me. How many times have you seen Hart since the crash?"

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She laughed harshly. "You should know. You've had me watched."

He grimaced unpleasantly. "I didn't realize you were that observant."

"I'm not. But your man introduced himself. He wanted to sell you out."

"It seems as if he isn't the only one. Well, did you buy?"

"He wasn't selling to me. Not exactly. He threatened to go to the insurance company."

George stared grimly ahead. "How did he know who I was? I only spoke to him once."

"He didn't have to know. A clever guess would have been enough. But in addition, the insurance investigator visited your man, put a few ideas in his head."

"Does the insurance company think I'm alive?"

"They've been following me."

"Here?"

"Of course. We're surrounded."

"All right, cut it out. What about the money?"

"I don't have it."

"You're lying." He said it quietly but the hate in his voice was as cold as steel. "You've been paid by the insurance company."

She pushed a wisp of hair from her eyes and smiled patiently. "Think that if you want to, George. But you're wrong. I don't have the money yet. And I won't get it either, not as long as the insurance company thinks you're alive. That's why we have to be patient."

"Is that right?" he said sardonically. "That's too bad. It really is."

"I'll let you know as soon as I get it."

"Very kind of you. However, that won't be necessary. I've already been informed. Through the paper. Or didn't you read the story?"

"What story?"

"The story about Acme's giving you a check for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was in last night's paper. You lied to me. That was the mistake you never should have made."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm doing more than that, Carol." A gun appeared in his hand and he jabbed out with it like a snake about to strike. "Swing onto the new highway! We're not going to Lonesome Valley. We're going across the state line."

Carol blanched. "The gun?" she whispered. "Where did you get it?"

"Don't worry about where I got it. Just keep driving. And pray."

"What do you mean? We're going across the state line."

"What I said. I know a place across the line where I'll be safe. How stupid do you think I am? Stupid enough to walk into the ambush you and your friend Hart have set?"

"No, George, no," she said weakly, "we don't have anything planned.

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But the doctor, you have to get to the doctor!"

"The doctor can come to *me*." He grinned evilly. "You're my hostage, Baby. When we get where I'm taking you, you phone your boyfriend. Tell him to bring the doctor. And you can tell your boyfriend that nothing'll happen to you if nothing happens to me. Now swing the car around!" His laugh echoed insanely. "Then you can send Hart back to pick up the money."

"It's in the bank. I'm the only one who can write checks on the account."

"*Then you do have it!*"

"Yes, I have it. You're right. I lied. But I'm still the only one who can draw the money out."

"No, Carol, you're wrong." He smiled drily. "Hart, competent lawyer that he is, can prepare a power of attorney. He can get the money."

She gripped the wheel until her knuckles were white. They had left the city behind and were speeding into the clutching blackness of the storm. They came to the lighted area of the state line and crossed it.

"You're going to kill me," Carol said tonelessly. Her left hand slipped off the wheel, reaching for her gun.

"Keep your hand where it is!" he said sharply. His lips echoed a laugh that had died deep in his throat and he spoke quietly, as if he were whispering confessions in the solitary stillness of a chapel. "Last night, when I knew for sure that you were trying to cheat me, I would have killed you. There seemed to be no other choice. I even came out to the house, planning to go through with it. But one of your admirers, one of your peeping Tom admirers, chased me away." He stared at the gun in his hand incongruously. "Now revenge doesn't seem so important. Like you, my dear, I want the *money*." He shrugged with a weary fatalism. "But if you try anything, I'd just as soon kill you as not. So cross your fingers and pray, Baby. Nothing else on this green earth can save you."

They came to a fork where a smaller paved road left the main highway and he said, "Take the narrow road!"

She did as he said. "Please, George. Tell me where we're going."

"You'll see soon enough."

He gripped her arm suddenly. "What's that?" He pointed down the ribbon of road. Dimly, several hundred yards ahead, they could see a red flare sputtering in a hurricane lamp. A shadowy figure, planted squarely in their path, started swinging a yellow warning light in a rocking half-circle. "It's a road block," George whispered in panic. "They're looking for me."

They were close enough now to discern the outline of a white patrol car turned into the middle of the highway. A state trooper, in yellow slicker and olive-drab cavalry hat, was operating the warning light. He started toward them. Carol felt the savage jab of the gun against her ribs. George's voice hissed across the few feet between them. "Don't make any wrong moves,

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Baby. There's no second chance in this game."

The state trooper was within range of the car headlights now. They could see him plainly, a strapping, ruddy youngster loping toward them with relaxed friendliness. Carol's eyes darted from the trooper to George and back again. Her heart thumped faster. This was her chance. She would say: "*The man beside me has a gun in my ribs.*"

But that was no solution. George would kill them both before the trooper could draw his gun. She could call on the trooper for help and give up the money, or she could play George's game George's way, for the only stakes that mattered.

She rolled down the window. The trooper bent his head to see them and little rivulets of water cascaded from his hat brim. Carol drew back and he laughed apologetically as he flashed a strong light in their faces. "Sorry, ma'am. Where are you folks going?"

Carol smiled at him. "We were going to visit some friends."

He shook his head. "You can't get there tonight." He gestured over his shoulder. "Bridge's out. About an hour ago. State highway crew won't get a temporary crossing up until tomorrow."

"What will we do?"

"You'll have to turn around, ma'am. Sorry." He straightened up. "You swing it around. I'll watch the side of the road."

Carol glanced at George. "Cut your wheels sharp right," the trooper yelled. "Then start backing."

Carol struggled with the steering wheel, backing slowly.

Suddenly she felt the rear wheels slipping off the pavement into the mud. She jammed on the brakes, shifting gears and feeding gas to the engine. The car inched forward but the rise at the pavement's edge was too much for the rear wheels. They started spinning crazily. Carol increased the pressure on the accelerator. The tires sang with the cruel discordant whine of a powersaw running through green lumber. The smoke of burning rubber floated in through the open window. She glanced at George. His face was whiter than she had thought possible. His breath came in short, rattling gasps as if each one might be his last.

She became aware of the trooper at the window again. He grinned at her. "Looks like you did it, all right." He shook his head in good-natured reproach. "You just don't know how to drive in mud, ma'am. I guess you never lived on a farm. I've taken Model A trucks through mud a foot deep." Before she could stop him he was opening the door. "Move over, ma'am. I'll get her out."

She put her hand to her mouth, stifling the instinctive cry of terror which had sprung from her throat. The gun, she thought, the gun, he would find the gun!

The door was wide open now. The trooper had one foot on the floorboard.

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He smiled reassuringly and she stared back glassily. She wanted to lunge for the gun but it was too late. The gun fell with an agonizing clatter to the pavement.

Carol gasped. Her heart beat frantically, like a mechanical toy wound too tight. She stole a glance at George. Huddled into himself in the corner by the other door, grinning weirdly at some secret joke, he seemed to be oblivious to life itself.

She glanced at the trooper, expecting him to investigate the noise. But he merely grinned and slid behind the wheel. Then it dawned on her — he had not heard it! He was too engrossed in the car. "Lots of horse there, ma'am. But you got to treat her gentle." He shifted to low, coaxing the car forward a few inches. He let it rock back. He coaxed it forward again, building up a rocking momentum. Finally he said, "Well, here goes."

The car shot forward onto the pavement and he cut the wheels sharply, swinging to the left. He straightened the car out and opened the door. "There you are, ma'am. I guess you know the way back to town. Sorry about the bridge."

She nodded weakly, struggling for an appropriate reply. But her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth like bare flesh on frozen metal. The gun, she thought, the gun, she had to get the gun.

She stared bleakly at the trooper who was standing off to the side a little uncertainly. She started to open the door, planning to retrieve the gun. Then she stopped. The moment she began searching in the darkness for the gun, they would be beside her, flashlight in hand, until they found what she was after. The moment they did, that would end it.

She shivered helplessly, overwhelmed by a problem which had no answers.

The trooper moved toward her. "Anything the matter, ma'am."

She tried to smile. "Nothing, thanks."

She put the car into gear and sped off into the night back the way they had come. She turned to George again. "George," she pleaded, her voice intimate with promise, "George, I want to share the money with you, darling, and go off together and start again. Mexico. South America." She wet her lips nervously. "I didn't mean those things I said earlier. I lost my head. I do love you. I've always loved you. Oh, not the way you've wanted me to, perhaps, but the best I knew how at the time. Now it'll be different. I can make it different. I swear I can!"

His sardonic grin mocked her impassioned pleas.

She stared at him speechlessly, hate and fear and bitterness ravaging her like an incurable disease. She looked down the road and then at the rearview mirror. *There were car headlights creeping up behind them!* A red spotlight flashed at the side of the pursuing car. The trooper was after them. *He had found the gun!*

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She pushed the accelerator to the floor. The car shot forward. "George!" she cried shrilly. "The trooper! He's after us!"

George jerked around. A cry of despair broke from his lips. "He can't be, he can't be! Why? Why would he be after us?"

She couldn't tell him. She couldn't tell him that she, too, had had a gun. "He can't catch us," she said. "Not in this car."

He gripped her arm savagely. "Don't be a fool!" he hissed. "He'll radio ahead if we try to run. Pull up and wait for him. Act calm. He doesn't know anything."

She stared at him dumbly. "He'll find out who we are. It'll be the end of everything."

George's face was deathly white. "Stop the car! It's our only chance."

Helplessly she took her foot off the accelerator, letting the car coast to a gradual stop. The patrol car drew abreast, its siren pulsing mournfully, and cut sharply in front of them.

They waited, watching the trooper as he jogged through the rain towards them. His face was unsmiling. He was panting as he came up to them. "I want to have a talk with you folks. I found a gun back there by the bridge, right where your car was. You folks own it?" He stared grimly from one to the other. "Well?"

George said hoarsely, "A gun, officer?"

"That's right." He held the gun up by its barrel. "Ever see it before?"

Carol turned mutely to George. George's eyes widened. He recognized it — his own gun. He said faintly, "It wasn't ours, officer. I can assure you of that."

The trooper looked at Carol. "What about you, ma'am?"

Carol tried to smile. "I wouldn't even know how to use one, officer."

The trooper scratched his head. "Mighty strange. You're the only ones been along the road since I got there. Let's see your driver's license and registration, ma'am."

Carol bit her lip and reached for her purse. She took out her wallet and handed it to the trooper. He read slowly, turning the driver's license so he could read by the dashboard lights. "Mrs. Carol Malden . . ." He paused. "What about the registration?"

"Registration?" She grimaced. "I'm afraid I don't have it."

The trooper frowned. "The law says you got to carry it with you all the time. You're across the state line, too. That makes it worse." He looked at George. "What about you, sir? You got some identification?"

George shook his head slowly. "I don't have a thing, officer. I just wasn't expecting to need anything when we left tonight."

"What's your name, sir?"

"My name? Well . . ."

"He's my husband," Carol said quickly. "We live just the other side of

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the line. We were going to visit some friends."

"On a night like this?" The trooper's manner was more suspicious but his voice was still polite. "I'm sorry, folks, but I'm gonna have to run you into the barracks. Let you straighten it out with the sergeant."

"But you can't do that to us!"

The trooper shrugged impassively. "I got no reason to disbelieve you folks, but a thing like this gun, it's pretty serious business. We can find out quick enough at the barracks who owns it." Reluctantly he said, "You folks wait till I get in my car. Then you drive on ahead, slow. I'll be behind. I'll signal which way to turn with my spot." He stood up and started walking toward the patrol car. Carol whispered urgently to George, "Offer him some money. Quick!"

"Money!" George said scornfully. "What good would that do now, you little two-timing bitch!" His eyes were glazed and his lips trembled. "Officer!" he shouted hoarsely. "Officer!"

The trooper hesitated, turned, and began walking back to their car. "Yes sir."

George leaned across Carol, the gun gleaming wickedly in his right hand. He raised his hand, pulling the trigger twice. Carol screamed and clawed at George's arm. She saw the trooper sagging like a puppet whose strings have been unexpectedly cut, in a tangled heap of arms and legs. His head hung, like a repentant sinner's, against his chest, and his fingers twitched uselessly, trying to raise the gun. She heard the death rattle in his throat.

"George!" she cried, "George!"

There was no answer. He was slumped in the opposite corner of the front seat, the gun, still smoking, resting on his lap. "George! George!" she whispered desperately.

Somehow she lit a match and the flare caught his face in its amber light, reflecting the same ghostlike image of the frozen grin and lifeless flesh she had seen a few minutes ago. She held the match in a shaking hand until it flickered out. "George!" She put out a hand and touched him. There was no response. Then, as a streak of distant lightning flooded the car's interior, she screamed. *He was dead.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GEORGE WAS DEAD. They both were dead.

She wanted to yank the door open and run blindly down the road, screaming for help. She shuddered in her corner of the seat, staring with shocked fascination at the limp body. With a supreme effort of will she turned her

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head to the left, staring at the dead trooper crumpled on the pavement in his oilskin slicker.

She glanced quickly at George again. It had been his heart, of course, it must have been. The trouble he had been having with it these past months, then the airplane crash, the strain of the last week, the bullet wound pouring infection into his system, and finally the events of the past hour, the argument they had had, the threat to kill her, the panic when the trooper stopped them, the final act of murder . . .

Oh, it was easy enough to see in retrospect. The wonder was, it hadn't happened sooner. Yet now that it had, where did it leave her?

It left her, she realized, lawfully entitled to the insurance proceeds on George's life, for George, this time, was really dead. She was the beneficiary. It was as simple as that.

But, she thought, with an agonized glance down the road, it was not as simple as that. *Because there was no insurance.* It had expired, she suddenly remembered, two days ago. So no matter how dead George was *now*, the fact that he had been alive a few minutes ago, if ever discovered, would cost her the insurance money.

She had to get rid of George's body. Once that was done, no one could ever prove he had survived the crash.

Yet she wasn't sure she had the courage or strength, even now, to drive to the Lonesome Valley quarry by herself, tonight, and then drag the corpse through the mud and slime to the quarry's edge. She might get stuck on one of the quarry roads, just as she had at the bridge. She shook her head. She needed Hart's help for that job. It had to be done right, not in a hurry, not in a panic, so that there would never be a trace.

But she had to get away from here. If another car came along, everything would be finished. She had to get away and back across the state line before the trooper's body was discovered and a roadblock set up. She opened the car door and forced herself to bend over the trooper. She had to retrieve her gun, the one he had found by the bridge. His fingers were locked around it like steel claws. One by one, Carol bent them back, finally freeing the gun and tossing it onto the front seat.

In a few minutes she was almost to the junction where the side road she was on would meet the main highway. A tremor of fear surged through her as she glanced again at George's body, flopping disjointedly like a rag doll. She couldn't risk traveling the main highway with a corpse on the seat beside her. The trunk, she thought. That was it. She would put the body in the trunk. She peered down the road. No cars. She jammed on the brakes and the corpse shot forward against the dashboard.

She opened her door and ran around to the other side. The rain slashed at her face like ocean spray flying off the rocks. The wind whipped her raincoat and skirt above her knees. She yanked the other door open. Before she

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could brace herself, the full weight of his body careened against her, knocking her backwards into the mud at the side of the road. The body itself fell to the pavement with a splintering crash.

She groped desperately in the darkness, looking for the gun which had been on George's lap. Finding it, she put it on the front seat with the gun she had taken from the trooper. She took hold of the corpse's arm, dragging it, sack-like, to the trunk. Her grip slipped twice and the arm fell back limply.

It seemed like hours before she had the body lying on the pavement beneath the trunk. Then, the way sound will sometimes carry on a rainy night, she heard the approaching hum of tires on asphalt. Down the road ahead, coming from the direction of the state line, she could see the dim glimmer of headlights. She tugged at the trunk handle. But it stuck, and she almost screamed.

The headlights were rushing toward her like meteorites, and she stood transfixed, hypnotized by this nightmare from which she could not hope to escape. She bent down and with the strength of panic, rolled the corpse under the car. The other vehicle was less than a hundred yards away. It drew abreast of her as she was clambering into her seat. She held her breath, not daring to look, praying it wouldn't stop. But she didn't have to look. She could hear the skidding squeal of tires braking on wet pavement.

A cheery male voice hailed her. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," she replied. She hid the guns behind her on the seat.

The driver got out of his car and walked uncertainly across the road. "Some night," he said tentatively. He was a fat, balding man with blubbery lips and greedy eyes, and his suit, under his transparent plastic raincoat, was shiny and poorly-fitted. "My name's Smith . . . Chuck Smith. You figure it's going to rain?" His forced, salesman's laugh trailed off into the night. "Don't mind me. I don't bite."

"Really? Then what *do* you do, Mr. Smith?"

He grinned foolishly, showing a row of discolored teeth. He wove slightly from side to side and she could smell the whisky on his breath, assailing her like the bad odors of a cheap perfume. He bowed stiffly. "I rescue damsels in distress."

"Then you'd better keep driving. This damsel has everything under control."

"Now don't get sore," he said. "A gal like you is too pretty to get mad." He smirked. "Seems funny, don't it? Just us two out here by ourselves. Maybe it's Fate. Whatya think? Think it's Fate?"

He was too drunk to reason with. But she had to satisfy his curiosity or he would never leave. She had to get him out of there and she had to get herself out. "My car stalled," she said. "Then I flooded the engine. It'll be all right in a few minutes. You go on. I can take care of myself."

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"Flooded the engine, huh? I thought so. Let me take a look at it." He strode to the hood and took an aggressive stance in front of the grillwork. "Just release that hood-lock under the dashboard, will you?" The hood went up and he disappeared beneath it. His muffled voice shouted to her, "Try the starter. Real easy."

She pushed the starter button. The motor kicked over but didn't catch. He slammed the hood. "To hell with it. I'll get my car. Give you a push."

"No!" she cried frantically. "No!" She put her right hand down for a gun. "*I don't need a push!*"

"The car won't start. You need something." He poked his head in the window. "Hey! You don't have the keys in the lock. No wonder!" He laughed uproariously. "What'd you do? Leave 'em home?"

"I . . . I . . ." She stammered helplessly. "I guess they're in the trunk. I thought at first I might have a flat. I went back to see if the spare was in good shape."

"I'll get 'em."

"*No, don't!*" She put out a restraining arm. "Please!"

"No trouble, no trouble." He strolled toward the trunk, whistling merrily.

Her right hand tightened on the gun and she strained to watch him in the mirror. But the rain blurred her vision. All she could do was wait.

She heard his steps. She jerked around with the savage tenseness of a trapped animal.

"Now," he said, "try this." He tossed the keys and they landed in her lap. She fumbled for them with her left hand. Her right was still on the gun. She put the key in the ignition and pushed the starter button.

"There," he said proudly, "that did it." He dusted his hands. "There's no charge for the service but how about stepping across the road? I got a bottle in the car."

"No thanks," she said.

He scowled. "Whatsa matter. Am I repulsive or something?"

Her nerves, strung wiretight, were ready to snap. "Leave me alone! Get out and leave me alone!"

"Okay, okay." He backed away awkwardly and started across the road, glancing at her over his shoulder and then shrugging and climbing into his car. He gunned the motor and roared off into the night.

The red tail lights faded into the blackness. Carol listened intently and then sprang from the car. She ran to the trunk, unlocked it, and got down on her knees to pull George's body out from under the car. She grasped the lifeless hulk under the armpits, trying to lift it into the trunk. A coatsleeve caught on a bumper guard and she cried out in frustration.

Finally she had the body in the trunk. She banged down the lid, took out the keys, and clambered behind the wheel. The car shot forward and she

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turned onto the main highway leading to the state line. There were lights ahead.

She realized, with a sickening awareness, what the lights were. They came from the agricultural inspection station at the state line. Too much had happened too fast; she had forgotten that her state, in an effort to control crop diseases, inspected incoming cars, confiscating all fruit and vegetables.

She couldn't go on. They would look in the trunk.

She laughed hysterically. It was too late to turn around anyhow. Cars coming from the other direction flashed by every few seconds, making it impossible to swing out and turn. And she couldn't risk pulling into the mud at the side of the road. Not at a time like this.

Now she was a hundred yards from the station. She put her head out the window. There were six cars ahead of her.

Far down the road behind her she could see the approaching headlights of another car. *The drunk!* She put her arms on the steering wheel and bent her head against them. Sobs shook her body. She was going to lose the money, she was going to lose it . . .

The inspector waved the fifth car on. And the sixth. Carol pulled up to the station. The inspector smiled at her. He was a young man with a crew cut. "Hi here. Got any fruits, plants, vegetables in the car?"

She took a deep breath. Somehow she managed a smile. "Not a thing. I just came across the other way a little while ago."

He nodded absently. "What about the trunk?"

"Not a thing."

"Mind if I take a look?"

She clutched his arm, turning her face up to his with a wide-eyed helplessness. "Please, I have to get back. My mother's sick. I don't have anything in the trunk. Please?"

He hesitated and a blush spread through his tan. He glanced at the cars piling up behind her. Gruffly he said, "All right, go ahead."

Hardly aware of what she was doing, she slammed the car into gear and drove off. She felt a strange fevered exhilaration. She had done it! She had won. The money was hers.

Then the reaction set in. It was not finished yet. They would be looking for her! She had to get off the main highway as soon as she came to a side road. Nervously, she flicked on the radio, hoping, that if the trooper's murder had been reported, there would be a news flash. The music of a dance band floated up from the speaker. She pushed the button for another station. A man was giving a political speech. She tried again. Ah, now she had it, a news program. She listened tautly.

> "*. . . sank in the Gulf of Mexico. Coast guard ships and planes are looking for survivors. The passenger list has not yet been released.*

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"The early evening murder of Tracy Clump, local private detective, by lawyer Hart McIntire, and the subsequent killing of McIntire by Acme Insurance investigator Shep Henderson is still under investigation by local police. An eye-witness, Nancy Hammond, has confirmed Henderson's explanation that his shooting of McIntire was in self defense. Police, however, are still interrogating the investigator. Now, some good news from our sponsor . . ."

Carol gasped. Hart was dead! A cry of despair froze in her throat. What had gone wrong? What kind of trap had they walked into? What would she do now? The initial shock yielded to the fierce demands of self-preservation. Hart was dead, she had to look out for herself. She smiled bitterly. It was not a new experience.

The body in the trunk! She couldn't return to the house with it. Not now. Shep, even the police, might be waiting for her. She had to get rid of the corpse *before* she went home. She had to drive to the quarry. She no longer had any choice.

And, when she did return to the house, she would keep her nerve. She would deny any connection with the killing of Clump. After all, Shep couldn't *prove* a connection.

Smiling to herself now, she turned left onto the first side road, heading for Lonesome Valley and the quarry.

She drove slowly up the narrow winding road until she came to the quarry summit. A hundred yards or so beyond it she could see lights burning in the tumbledown shanty of a truck farmer. She hadn't counted on that, but the rain and the night protected her. They wouldn't see her. She turned off the headlights and opened her door. Over by the shanty a dog began to bark.

She hesitated. If the dog kept barking, the farmer would investigate. But if she drove on without getting rid of the body, she would have to come back. The farmer might be waiting for her the second time. If she acted quickly now and got it over with, she could be on her way. It was too dark for the farmer, even if the dog did arouse him, to identify her car.

Quickly she slipped the gun George had used into the pocket of her raincoat, took the keys, and ran to the trunk. She unlocked it and removed the keys. Lightning flashed and she caught a glimpse of a rain-soaked lifeless body shoved against the spare tire. The hair and skin were caked with mud and roadside grime, and the smell of soggy clothing rose as faintly as embalmer's perfume. She pulled the body out. Her heart thumped wildly. She paused, listening. The dog. Damn him! The barking seemed closer. She grasped the corpse, and moving backward, lugged it across the road and into the weeds at the side. Five feet, ten feet, she was at the quarry edge. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and shoved the body over the precipice. She stood transfixed, listening to its rumbling descent down the quarry wall and the noise made by the quicksand as it closed over another victim.

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Then she whirled around, reaching for the gun. The dog! The dog was charging through the underbrush. She fired blindly in the direction of the noise. The dog, frightened by the noise of the gun, stopped his charge and began barking again. More lights went on in the shack. She threw the gun into the pit.

Carol ran to the car. She slammed the door, started the engine and sped off down the other side of the hill. She had done it. She was safe!

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHEP HENDERSON, SPRAWLING uncomfortably on a narrow-runged wooden chair in Lieutenant Corsi's office in the Police Building, grinned sourly at the short, dark-browed Homicide detective, then took his time lighting a cigarette and blowing out the match in a studied gesture of contempt for anything that Corsi or McAllister, hidden in the shadows by the door, might have to say.

Lieutenant Corsi, his pockmarked face and whisker shadows cruelly exaggerated by the uneven lighting, leaned forward grimly with the intense asceticism of an agent of the Inquisition. His nostrils quivered impatiently as he tried to control his frustration. "When I ask you a question, Henderson, I want an answer, not any of your goddamn lip. Clump's as dead as a bullet in the brain can make him, and you know who gets credit for that? Not McIntire, brother, but you. You were there. You were waiting for something. You either tell me what the hell you were doing watching Clump or you sit in the tank until you do."

Shep flicked the match into the shadows. "Okay, so I'll get a writ."

Corsi's answering laugh was harsh and cynical. "What's a writ? I never heard of one."

Lieutenant McAllister spoke softly from his chair by the door. "Shep, just because we're cops we're not dumb. Hell, we know you weren't parked outside the Burns Building with a gun because you were waiting for ducks to fly over. You were expecting somebody to come gunning for Clump. That's when you should have called us in. I'll tell you something else. You weren't expecting McIntire, otherwise you wouldn't have let him get by you into the building. My guess is, you were expecting this guy." McAllister pointed to the photograph of Malden which Henderson had given him yesterday. "That's who you were expecting." McAllister sighed. "Two dead men, Shep. The blood of both is on your hands."

Corsi interrupted, "You were there to watch Clump, weren't you?"

"You're telling it," Shep said. "You prove it."

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McAllister shook his head. "You're acting like some cheap punk we round up off the street. What's the matter, you got a guilty conscience? We don't have to *prove* anything, this isn't a trial."

Shep said, "I don't get it. McIntire killed Clump. I shot McIntire in self-defense. The case is closed. So why don't you get off my back? I saved the state the expense of a trial, didn't I?"

Corsi said, "Nobody's said you're clean yet. Maybe you were in on the Clump job with McIntire. Maybe you doublecrossed McIntire. Those things we got to look into."

"I've got a witness."

Corsi snorted contemptuously. "A witness? Your girl friend, you mean. What kind of witness is that?"

McAllister said, "Maybe there'll be another murder, Shep. Who's the guy whose picture you gave me yesterday? What's he got to do with all this?"

"You're the one who says he's mixed up in it, not me. I don't know anything."

Corsi said bitterly, "You don't know anything." He spat effortlessly into the cuspidor at his feet. "You've forgotten damn quickly since yesterday then. You knew something when you gave Dave his picture. You knew Clump, didn't you?"

"I'd seen him around."

"Did he handle insurance investigations for you?"

"No."

"I suppose you both belonged to the same lodge?" Corsi laughed briefly at his own joke. "All right. Let's have it. Why were you waiting outside the Burns Building?"

"You're wasting your time. If you want to bring charges, go ahead."

"You knew McIntire, didn't you?"

"Sure, I knew him."

"Why'd he kill Clump?"

"I don't know."

Exasperated, Corsi turned to McAllister. "Henderson's your friend. What's he trying to hide?"

"He thinks we'll louse up some insurance case he's working on. But you got it wrong, Joe. Shep's not my friend. I'll tell you something about him, Joe. He doesn't have many friends anymore." In the shadows McAllister's large body shifted uneasily and the chair creaked painfully. McAllister sighed quietly, like a dying man recognizing his own mortality. "We all got to be lonely some of the time. We all got our regrets. We all got our ways to fight them. But Shep here, he takes out his grudge against life on the people he goes after for Acme. Not that he gives a damn if somebody swindles Acme, he's got about as much social conscience as Dillinger. It just makes

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him feel good to hunt a man down. If a couple of innocent bystanders get bullets in them along the way, it doesn't bother him, just so he can still get his man. Joe, meet Shep Henderson of the Royal Northwestern Mounted Police."

Shep said impassively, "What makes you think the bystanders are innocent?"

Corsi picked up his words and pounced back with them. "What makes you think they're *not* innocent?"

Shep shrugged. "We're all talking philosophy in this little seminar. Most people get what they have coming."

McAllister said, "I'm warning you, Shep, don't try to be too funny. Now, let's try again. Let's get back to the guy whose picture you gave me. I want to know who he is. You said yesterday he was taking Acme for a hundred and fifty grand. Did Clump know that? Did McIntire know it. Were they fighting over the spoils?"

Corsi said, with something like awe in his voice, "A hundred and fifty grand! What was it, Henderson, a life insurance swindle? What did they do, buy a stiff from an undertaker and palm it off as the body of the one who had all the insurance?" He pressed the intercom switch on his desk and said crisply, "This is Corsi. Tell Kelly to check the obit notices for the last month. I want the names of the people who died in auto crashes, fires, explosions, and any other way where it might have been hard to identify the body. I want the names by tomorrow noon." He grinned humorlessly at Henderson. "One thing about us, we're stupid but we're methodical. So the Lord help you, my friend, if one of these stiffs is the man whose picture you gave to Dave. If it is, I'll guarantee to swear out the warrant for you myself. Obstructing justice is a felony in this state. It'll be a couple of years before you can do it again."

Henderson said wearily, "I don't know anything. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Corsi indicated the door with his thumb. "You wait outside. Send in the dame."

Shep stood up, gripping the desk with his hands. "Just keep one thing straight, Corsi. She isn't a *dame*. Don't try treating her like one."

Corsi laughed nervously. He said to McAllister, "Say, did you know knighthood was still in flower, Dave?"

McAllister grunted ambiguously and stood up to let Shep by. Their eyes met briefly, then McAllister said quietly, "Why do you have to play it alone, Shep? Why? Aren't two deaths enough for you? Do there have to be more?"

Shep walked by without answering. In the other room Nancy was sitting on an old oaken bench by the door. "Your turn," he said.

She tamped out a cigarette in the sandpot ashtray and brushed a few

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rain-soaked wisps of hair. She slipped by him into Corsi's office and he sat down in the same place.

Shep pressed his ear against the wall, trying to pick up the voices in the next room. But he could hear nothing. Time passed and the strain began to tell. If Nancy told them about Malden, that would tie it. Corsi would lock him up. The police would go after Malden, the reporters would get the story, and Malden would vanish into thin air.

The sound of the door opening broke in on his thoughts and he looked up to see Corsi and Nancy standing in front of him. Corsi glanced at him contemptuously. "You can go . . . but don't congratulate yourself too soon. We aren't through with you yet."

Shep got up. Corsi said, "Inquest's at three day after tomorrow. Both of you be there. You can do your lying under oath." He beckoned wearily to the plainclothes man. "Okay, bring in the Mexicano."

Shep took Nancy's arm but she pulled it away swiftly. He shrugged and waited for her to lead the way. When they were out on the street she turned and faced him angrily, indifferent to the rain. "All right," she said, "I kept my promise to you, I don't know why. They didn't learn anything from me. So I hope you're satisfied." Her face was pale in the lamplight and her lips, red gashes, trembled with accusations. "What McAllister said to me in there is true. You're a moral leper. Your sense of values is as twisted as a corkscrew. You don't belong on the side of law and order; you just march under that banner for convenience."

"He really fed you full of it, didn't he?"

"He didn't have to, Shep. He just read my thoughts." She studied him carefully. "I'll give you until the inquest. Then I'm going to tell them what I know."

"I've already got a shorter deadline from Corsi. He's checking the obits to see how many people in the last month died in accidents where identification could have been difficult. He's guessing that McIntire and Clump were mixed up in a scheme to swindle Acme by getting a dead body from the morgue and then palming it off as one of our insureds. It's the wrong guess but it'll lead him to Carol's door. So I've got until tomorrow to prove Malden's alive. Once Corsi goes into action, once the press gets the story, I don't have a chance."

"Poor Shep Henderson."

"Don't worry about me. I'm not sorry for myself."

"Maybe that's half your trouble."

"You always did want to reform me, Nancy. What did you want to make me over into? Sir Galahad?"

She laughed uncomfortably. "This all has a familiar ring."

He turned up his coat collar. "Well, we never get anywhere talking. I'll order you a taxi."

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"Where are you going?"
"Back to get my car."
"Then?"
"I don't know."
"You're going to see Carol Malden, aren't you?"
"Maybe."
"All right," she said, "you get your car. Don't worry about me. I'll get home." She turned and walked off quickly into the night, her sharp heel taps echoing like the staccato of Chinese firecrackers. He watched helplessly until the last sound died away and then he flagged a taxi. The taxi took him to the Burns Building where he picked up his own car. Then he drove slowly through the city, watching his rearview mirror, expecting Corsi to have somebody tailing him. Finally, satisfied that it was safe, he headed out to Carol Malden's house.

There were no lights but he thought it was too early for her to have gone to bed. He parked under the trees, lights out, and waited for her return. It was eleven when her car finally swung into the driveway.

When she got out of her car to open the garage door he shouted to her. She peered into the darkness in the direction from which his voice had come. "I want to talk to you," he said grimly.

She stood a moment by the half-opened garage door and then pulled it shut again. She started walking across the grass. He opened his door and she stared at him uncertainly.

"Get in!" he said.

She climbed in beside him.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"I don't know what business it is of yours," she said hollowly. "I've been for a drive."

He took out his cigarette lighter, carefully timing his next move. With his other hand he offered her a cigarette. He flicked the lighter, catching her face in its quick glare. Her hair was disheveled, her clothes were soaked, and her eyes had the glassy rigidity of someone almost paralyzed by fear. "You know, don't you," he said savagely, "that he's dead?"

Her mouth dropped open but no sound came. She stared at him, transfixed, like a night animal caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Finally she was able to whisper, "Who . . . who is dead?"

"McIntire. I killed him."

Then the scream came, a piercing wild high note shambling the night with a tormented confession of pain too great to bear.

"You killed him," she gasped, "you killed him. Why? Oh, my God, why?"

"Mostly because I didn't want him killing me. But also to do society a favor. He died in a back alley, where he belonged."

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"He *can't* be dead," she said, "he can't be." She put her hands to her face and her whole body shuddered in a spasm of grief. "You murdered him," she said tonelessly.

"No, but I let *him* murder somebody. In some circles that's just as bad."

"What do you mean?"

He turned to face her, a fierce and vicious bitterness welling inside him. She was beautiful and helpless and as innocent as a Borgia. "You know what I mean. He killed Clump for you."

She closed her eyes. He dug his fingers into her shoulders and began to shake her. "Don't lie to me," he said between clenched teeth. He released her abruptly, furious with himself for the momentary loss of control. "You can't afford the luxury of lies this time, my sweet. The police will be here soon. Lie to them and you'll lie your way right into the chair."

She massaged her shoulders where he had bruised her. Her head was cocked slightly, like a doe startled by strange sounds in the forest. "Police? What would they want with *me?*"

"Don't waste that acting talent on me, Carol. There isn't time for it."

"I don't understand."

"Not much, you don't. Clump and McIntire were together in your house earlier today. A couple of hours later, McIntire goes gunning for Clump. I wonder why."

She glared at him defiantly, then her lips parted slowly in an elusive smile. "Did you really expect to overwhelm me with that announcement? I know you've had somebody watching the house. You had someone here tonight too when I left." She allowed herself a short, triumphant laugh. "He didn't stay with me very long, though. Will it cost him his job?" Her finger and thumb played nervously with a button on her raincoat. "Yes, Clump and Hart were here today. There's no secret about it. Hart retained Clump a month or so ago. On my behalf." She glanced at him guilelessly. "Do I have to go on?"

"Skip the build-up. Why did McIntire retain him?"

Carol fluttered her eyelids. "I know what you think of me. You'll think even less after I tell you what I did."

"Go on."

"I wanted a divorce from George. He wouldn't give me one. I had no grounds for one. But I had heard stories about another woman George had been seeing. A month or so ago I hired Clump to keep an eye on George. To see if he could get enough evidence for a divorce."

"You hired him or McIntire hired him?"

"Hart did. He'd employed Clump on other matters. Clump didn't have many scruples. He was the kind of person we needed."

"Your story doesn't stand up. McIntire was also your husband's lawyer. He wouldn't be working against his own client."

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Carol smiled archly. "*Why* do you think I wanted the divorce, Shep? There was very little Hart wouldn't have done to get it for me."

"What's all this got to do with why Clump was at your house today?"

She sighed. "Ah, now we come to the heart of the matter. Our friend, Mr. Clump, received a visit from you yesterday evening. For reasons best known to yourself, you suggested to him that George was still alive. It was the first word that Clump had had that George was in an airplane crash. You see, Clump hadn't done any work for me for several weeks. We'd had a falling-out over his fees. I hadn't paid him. I hadn't been able to. When he learned from you that I had some insurance money, he came around to collect. That was the reason for his visit today." She turned her hands upward in a gesture of resignation. "That's the whole story. I feel better, getting it off my chest."

"I'll bet you do," he said sarcastically. She was lying, she had to be, but there was a twisted thread of possibility cleverly woven into the fabric of the lie. He clenched the steering wheel tightly, struggling to contain his frustration. "I hope the jury believes it."

The note of alarm in her voice gave him a grim satisfaction. "What jury?"

"The jury which is going to try you for Clump's murder. Just because McIntire pulled the trigger, it doesn't mean he's the only one who can be charged with murder."

"But Shep," she said patiently, as if explaining simple facts to a small child, "I don't know why Hart killed Clump. Truly, I don't. It wasn't over what I owed Clump. That was just twelve hundred dollars. You don't think I'd object to paying that when I had a hundred and fifty thousand." She made a moue of distaste. "Hart had many dealings with Clump. I don't know what they were but I can guess that there were some unsavory matters. Perhaps . . ." Her voice trailed off and she shrugged expressively.

"It was unsavory all right. Clump had the goods on both of you. He knew your husband was alive and he knew how much his information was worth." Shep laughed drily. "You should have paid him. For murder they always get you in the end."

Her voice rose angrily. "What are you trying to do, frame me? Blackmail me? Threaten me? You're the one who says George is alive. You prove it!"

"I will. Sooner than you think."

"Good! Write me about it, will you? Any good resort hotel in South America will have my forwarding address."

A smile flicked across his face. "You're not going anywhere."

Her mask of outrage and fury disintegrated, shattered like a china vase in a hundred pieces. She whispered hoarsely, "What do you mean?"

"That's right," he said grimly, "start sweating, Carol. Sweat good."

She put out a hand tentatively to touch him. "Oh Shep, why are we

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talking like this? I don't want to fight." Her voice broke in a muffled sob and tears glistened on her eyelashes. She threw herself against him, burying her face in his shoulder. "Don't treat me like this. Don't say those things to me. You're the only friend I have now. Help me, Shep, help me!" She turned her tear-stained face to his, whispering intimately with promises of Paradise. "Come with me, Shep. You'll never regret it, never. This futile little city isn't the world. Come with me and we will all the pleasures prove that —" she hesitated, suddenly confused — "Isn't that strange? That's a line of poetry I learned in school."

The desire to crush her to him and lose himself in the rhythms of her embrace was almost overwhelming. Her beauty tantalized him. The Paradise she promised would be real enough. Yet something held him back, some elusive instinct of self-preservation forced him to push her away. "Where is he?" he said roughly. "Where's your husband?" He waited for the words to sink in. "He's alive, isn't he?"

She stared back at him, her eyes wide with disbelief at his rejection. She put a hand to her throat. "No, he's dead, quite dead. You know it as well as I do."

"You're lying," he said. "You met him tonight. That's why you had to get rid of the man I had following you."

"I went for a drive. Nothing else."

"You've got mud on your raincoat. You're soaking wet. What were you doing?"

She looked down at her raincoat, rubbing a hand slowly across the muddy part of the material. She looked at her fingers. "I went for a walk. I slipped in some mud."

"Where? Where were you walking?"

Her eyes narrowed warily. She stared out her window. She spoke with a glacial calm. "I don't have to answer your questions. I'm not going to. George is dead. If you want to persecute me anymore, you'll have to do it through my lawyer."

He laughed drily. "Your lawyer's dead too. Remember?"

"I'm not going to discuss it."

His voice softened slightly. "I'll make a deal with you, Carol. You sign a statement your husband's alive and turn back the money. We won't prosecute. I'll cover the trail for you on Clump's murder. You'll be in the clear." He looked at her enviously and with longing. "My God, you're young, beautiful. You can start again."

"I don't have to start again, thank you." She turned her door handle. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," he said, "there is. You play it the other way, the way you're playing it now, and I'll pin Clump's murder on you if it's the last thing I do. But I won't stop there. I'll find your husband too, no matter how long it

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takes or how much it costs." He turned the key in the ignition. "We know he's alive. We found his footprints near the scene of the crash."

"Did you think I didn't know? The clerk at Chilson's told me you were checking on his shoe size." She laughed. "No, you didn't know that I knew *that*, did you?" She opened the door and stepped into the rain, turning to taunt him. "But you can't prove he's alive, can you? Those shoeprints could belong to a thousand men. You're wasting your time, Mr. Henderson. George Malden's dead and all the insurance investigators in the world can't bring him back to life."

He stared at her soberly, almost convinced she was telling the truth. "Okay, Mrs. Malden," he said quietly, "you've given me the challenge. I'll see if I can't deliver."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIEUTENANT CORSI STUFFED the rest of the doughnut in his mouth and munched it with the quick short bites of a squirrel nibbling a nut. Reluctantly he punched an intercom button. Crisply he said, "Kelly back yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Send him in."

There was a knock on his door. "Yeah?" he said.

A big man in a rumpled brown suit opened the door uncertainly. "You wanted me, Boss?"

"Yeah. You find him?"

The man blinked and permitted himself the trace of a smile. "I sure did. His name's Malden. The way I did it, we got a list of about fifty people who had died in accidents where it would have been impossible to identify them. Then I figured, why not check all the names in the morgue at the Sentinel, see if there were any photos in the morgue which would match up with the photo you gave me. Well, I was in luck, because I found this guy Malden. Airplane crash, about . . ."

"Okay," Corsi interrupted impatiently. "You got an address?"

"Sure do, Boss." He tapped his breast pocket. "Right here."

"Who's the survivor?"

"His wife. Lives in Crestwood."

Corsi grimaced. "That bastard Henderson. This'll show him where he gets off, holding out on us." Corsi took his coat and hat off a rack. "Come on, Kelly. We're going to talk to Mrs. Malden."

The two men walked down the corridor to the stairs and out a side door

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to the parking lot. The sun, after yesterday's storm, was out again, hazily presiding over the equatorial mugginess left by the rains. They climbed in a police cruiser, Kelly taking the wheel. Kelly started the motor and pulled into the righthand traffic lane. "Use the siren?"

Corsi shook his head and, with a feeling of relief, managed the belch he had been waiting for. Kelly said tentatively, "How've you been feeling, Boss?"

"Lousy."

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Then Kelly said amiably, "You hear about that trooper who got it across the line?"

"Yeah, I heard. They want a dame for questioning. A blonde in a black Chrysler. They think she comes from this state." Corsi scowled. "There's only about ten thousand black Chryslers. What do they expect us to do?"

"I didn't know there was a dame in a black Chrysler."

"It wasn't in the papers. They didn't let the reporters in on it. It came in on a three-state bulletin. The guy who found the body said there was this dame stalled down the road aways from the trooper. One of the fellows at the inspection station remembers her going across the line. She said she'd just come from our way a little earlier in the evening."

Corsi said, "Now tell me about Malden."

"You remember that plane crash about ten days ago? Well, he was one of the passengers. That's all there is to tell."

Corsi scratched his head. "Maybe I had it pegged wrong."

"Had what pegged wrong, Boss?"

"Henderson — he's the insurance investigator who was mixed up in that shooting yesterday — gave McAllister the photo you have. Two days ago. He told Dave then he was looking for the guy in the photo but couldn't put out an alarm for him. Last night I figured that the guy in the picture might be mixed up in a life insurance swindle, but I figured it for one of these deals where a car is driven over a cliff and burns. There's a body in the wreckage when they find the car but it can't be identified. I thought maybe the people pulling the swindle had bought a dead body somewhere and stuck it in the car owned by the guy in the picture, then sent the car over the cliff." Corsi shrugged. "Now it looks like I made it too complicated. This Malden, if he was in the plane crash and Henderson's looking for him, maybe he just walked away from the crash."

"Everybody in the plane was killed. Anyhow, what's that got to do with the shootings at the Burns Building?"

"Maybe nothing. That's what I want to find out."

They turned onto a quiet street of expensive homes and Kelly said, "Here we are. You want me to stay in the car?"

"No, come on in. We'll see what old lady Malden has to say about it."

Corsi walked briskly up the flagstone path followed by Kelly. Corsi

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pushed the bell and the door opened almost immediately. Corsi gulped. A girl, her hands defiantly planted on her hips, stood there in red velvet toreador slacks and a black, gold-embroidered jacket. The carmine slashes of her lips, the brooding fire in her eyes, and the golden hair tumbling about her shoulders gave her a fierce kind of beauty, as if she were a timeless creature born to immortalize passion and desire. "Mrs. Malden?" Corsi said deferentially.

"Yes?"

"Lieutenant Corsi. This is Sergeant Kelly. Police Department."

A fleeting expression of what, panic or uncertainty, passed across her face, and her eyes widened. "Police?" She stood aside. "Come in.

"This way, please." She led them down some steps to a sunken living-room. "Sit down, please."

Corsi posted himself by the window. "I'll stand, if you don't mind, Mrs. Malden." His sharp, ferret eyes took the room in quickly. He put his hat on a lamp table. "We want to ask you some questions about your husband."

"My husband? But he's dead."

"I know." Corsi turned to Kelly. "Show Mrs. Malden that picture."

Kelly stepped forward awkwardly and handed her the photo. Corsi said, "Is that your husband?"

She nodded slowly. Corsi said, "Before we begin, Mrs. Malden, it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

She laughed faint-heartedly. "You make it sound ominous. What is this all about?"

"Just a routine investigation of a murder."

She caught her breath sharply. "A murder?"

"Was your husband's life insured, Mrs. Malden?"

"Yes."

"For how much?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"All right. Do you know an insurance investigator named Henderson?"

She hesitated, crossed and uncrossed her legs. "Yes, I know him."

"A lawyer named Hart McIntire?"

"Yes."

"A private detective named Tracy Clump?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"You know that McIntire shot Clump yesterday? And that Henderson shot McIntire?"

She nodded.

Corsi waited a few seconds, watching her intently. Let her sweat, he thought. That was the way to break them down. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Please do."

Corsi lit a cigarette. "What do you know about the shootings?"

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She shrugged helplessly and her eyelids trembled slightly as if she were close to tears. "I tell you this because I realize *these* are questions you have to ask. For the sake of my husband, my husband's memory, I hope that what I am going to tell you ends the matter." She reached nervously for a cigarette box. "I was in love with Hart McIntire. He was in love with me. My husband, I think, knew this; at any rate, he refused to let me have a divorce. It was a terribly involved emotional situation and in desperation I hired a private detective, Mr. Clump, to watch my husband. I had hopes that in this way I might obtain enough evidence to support a divorce action.

"Mr. Clump was a detective, somewhat unscrupulous perhaps, recommended by Hart. Hart had had many dealings with him before." She shook her head and her voice faltered, as if the memory of what she had done was too distasteful for repetition. "Mr. Clump and I parted company some time ago, mainly because I was unable to pay his bills. I owed him about a thousand dollars. Then, yesterday, he paid me a visit. He had just learned of my husband's death and the fact that I would be entitled to some insurance money. I promised to pay him and he left."

There was an edge of sarcasm in Corsi's voice. "What's all that got to do with the shootings, Mrs. Malden?"

"As far as I know, it doesn't have anything. I have no idea why Hart went to see Mr. Clump, although, as I said, Hart had had many dealings with Mr. Clump. Some of them, perhaps, not too savory."

"And why, in your opinion, was Henderson there?"

"I don't know."

"What's your relationship with Henderson?"

"My relationship?"

"Well, you said you knew him, didn't you?"

Her laugh was brittle. "I certainly did. We were married once. And his company carried the insurance on my husband's life."

"So you were married to Henderson. That explains a lot."

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

"We'll skip that for the time being, Mrs. Malden. He was also investigating your husband's death, wasn't he?"

She smiled grimly. "That's right. It was a large claim. Acme, like most insurance companies, wanted to get out of paying *anything* if it could. Unfortunately, it couldn't. That didn't stop Mr. Henderson, however. As a matter of fact, that's how Mr. Clump learned my husband was dead. Mr. Henderson visited him and implied not only that George was still alive but also that Mr. Clump knew it."

"And just why would Henderson imply something like that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, unless it was the fact that Mr. Clump had been watching the house in recent days, and Mr. Henderson thought that he might be watching *me* on behalf of my husband."

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"And in your opinion, why was he watching it?"

"I rather imagine that since I wasn't able to pay him the money I owed him, he was going to get his revenge by watching my activities with Hart, and then sell the information to my husband. You have to remember, he didn't know about the crash."

"I'm remembering it, Mrs. Malden." Corsi, glancing out the window, saw a car coming to a stop behind the police cruiser. A service station attendant in a white coat got out and started up the walk.

The doorbell rang and she stood up quickly. "Excuse me." As she left the room Kelly said in an undertone, "You believe her, Boss?"

"What do you think?" Then he gestured with his thumb toward the street. "Take a look at that car behind the cruiser."

Kelly approached the window. His voice was hushed and unconsciously he gripped Corsi's arm. "*A black Chrysler!*"

"Yeah. A black Chrysler." Corsi paused, listening to the voices at the door. The service station attendant said cheerfully, "Car's all washed, Mrs. Malden."

"Thanks, Pete," she said. "Just a minute." She reappeared in the living-room. "The man from the gas station's here with my car. Do you want to ask me more questions or can I shag him back?"

Corsi's face was bland. "You can shag him. Just one more thing, Mrs. Malden. Did you go out last night at anytime?"

She wrinkled her forehead. "Last night? Yes, I was out for awhile?"

"When?" Corsi snapped.

"Well, I didn't pay any attention to the time."

"You know whether it was seven o'clock or nine o'clock or eleven o'clock, don't you?"

"It was late-ish."

"How long were you out? And why?"

"Just what has *that* got to do with anything? What right do you have to ask me these questions?"

Corsi shrugged. "You don't have to answer anything, Mrs. Malden, if you're afraid to."

"I don't know when I got back. Maybe around midnight. I just wanted to get away from the house." She shuddered imperceptibly. "Do you have any idea how depressing this place is *now*?"

"Where did you go?"

"I hardly remember. I drove around town, went to the park, got out, took a walk, and came home. Any more questions?"

Corsi squashed his cigarette. Not looking at her, he said, "No, Mrs. Malden, that does it. Come on, Kelly."

The two detectives walked past her and past the service station attendant. As they got in the car Kelly said, "What about it, Boss?"

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Corsi glanced at the house. In the doorway Carol Malden stared back, imperious and hostile, like a princess watching the flogging of a slave. Some dame, Corsi thought. He reached for the radio microphone and pressed the button. "This is Corsi." He waited for the dispatcher's go-ahead, then said, "That trooper who was killed over the line. Get all the dope you can. Any witnesses, see if the state police want to bring them over here. We got a lead." Corsi put the microphone back. He turned to Kelly. "Acme Insurance Building. I want to talk to Henderson."

Corsi sat down opposite Henderson. He leaned forward grimly. "We've been talking to your ex-wife, Henderson." He sat back, pleased with himself. Henderson shrugged. "I guess I should have told you last night."

"Why do that? It would have only made things easy."

"I wasn't trying to foul you up, Corsi. But I had a hundred and fifty thousand bucks I was after. The cops get in the act, you know what happens. The guy I'm after goes five miles underground."

"She's a nice dish. You trying to cover for her?"

Henderson flushed. "You're all wet. I'm after the money."

"How do you know Malden's alive?"

"We found some footprints in a farmyard near the crash. They matched Malden's."

"So would a couple of thousand others."

"Then there was Clump. He was tailing Carol Malden. It all tied in with the theory Malden was alive and didn't trust his wife. He wanted to keep an eye on her, so he hired Clump. On a hunch I had a talk with Clump, gave him some big ideas about what he could get if he could prove Malden was alive. Next thing that happens, Clump calls on the dame. Probably to try a little blackmail. Well, you know what happened."

"She's got her own story about why Clump called on her."

"I know. She told me. She's lying. But prove it? That's something else."

"If you'd told us this *before* yesterday, Clump and McIntire would still be alive."

"So they're dead. The world's a better place."

"Who are you to judge?"

"Who are you to ask me?" Henderson winced imperceptibly. "All right, I was wrong. Show me somebody who was ever right about two things in a row."

"Maybe Malden did die in the crash."

Henderson shook his head. "It's no good, Corsi. Too many things are unexplained. Like last night. We had a tail on her . . ."

"You had a tail on her last night! Where'd she go?"

"That's what I mean. She shook the tail. Why would she do that? I'll tell you why. She was going to meet her husband."

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Corsi swore. "Of all the times to lose her!"

"What are you getting at?"

Corsi grimaced. "I ought to hold out on you, too. But I won't. You read about the trooper?"

Henderson nodded disinterestedly. Corsi said, "A blonde in a black Chrysler was seen on the same road."

Henderson shrugged. "So what? You think she's the only blonde who has a black Chrysler? What have you got for motive? Or for why she would be over there? Not that I'd put a murder or two past her. She might kill her husband if she had the chance. But why a state trooper? And in another state at that?"

"That's what bothers me. I was hoping you'd have an answer."

Henderson squinted hard at a spot on his desk. "I was at her house last night when she got back. She was a mess. Hair wet, mud all over her coat."

"What time?"

"About midnight."

"She says she was walking in the park."

"So she was walking in the park. Can you prove she wasn't?"

"We can't run her in. Not yet. They can still sue for false arrest in this state."

"You've got probable cause?"

"I can't figure you out, Henderson. You were married to her once. Now you want us to lock her up. What if she did kill the trooper? You'd still have to pay her."

"Maybe I'm just interested in seeing justice done."

"Yeah. Maybe I'll be the next police commissioner." Corsi picked absently at a hangnail. "You got somebody watching her right now?"

"Yeah. But she shook our man once, she can probably do it again. If you want her, you'd better pick her up."

Corsi sighed and stood up. "You got a lot of advice for a man who's been so wrong. I'll see you, Henderson."

"I'd like to come with you. You're still working on it, aren't you?"

"That's right. But it'd be a cold day before I'd invite you along."

"I'm not asking for favors. But if I don't go with you, I'm going out to see her. I'd hate to queer your play."

Corsi glanced at Henderson contemptuously. "I've heard of bastards like you. Okay, come on."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CAROL MALDEN STOPPED her nervous pacing and peered down the street from behind the curtains of her bedroom window. She drew back quickly. The car of the Acme man who had been watching the house all morning was still parked at the far end of the block. All right, she was not going to let him stop her any longer.

Grimly, decisively, she crossed to the chest of drawers and began throwing clothes into the open suitcase on the bed. She tucked a few perfume and medicine bottles in at the sides. Then she phoned the railroad station and asked when the next train left for Houston. The bored voice of an elderly railroader began reciting schedules like a litany. But the first train didn't leave until evening. It was too long to wait. And too dangerous. She hung up impatiently and called the bus station. She could get a bus in two hours.

She took a last glance at the street and went downstairs.

She walked to her car and drove off slowly, pausing at the end of the first block to be sure the Acme man was following her. He was. He kept a discreet distance between them until they entered the heavy downtown traffic and then he closed the interval so as not to lose her at a stoplight.

At Exeter and Tenth she began looking for a parking place and drove once around the block to be sure he knew she planned to stop. The second time around she turned into a parking lot. To the attendant she said, "I'll be back in twenty minutes. Keep it where I can get out in a hurry, please."

She started walking toward the big Airline Ticket Office in the middle of the block. From the corner of her eye she could see the Acme man frantically backing into a parking space. She slowed down, giving him time to finish parking and to see her go into the Airline Office. She walked over to one of the young clerks behind the Reservations Desk. She smiled at him. "When's your next plane to Los Angeles?"

"In just about an hour."

"Can I still get on?"

"You sure can." He began filling out a ticket application. "Name?"

"Mrs. Carol Malden."

"One way?"

She nodded and opened her purse to pay him. Three minutes later she had her ticket and was standing on the street in front of the building. She was aware of the Acme man watching from his car. Good! Everything was working the way it should. She pretended to stand there in indecision, but she was watching the traffic on the opposite side of the street, waiting for an

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empty taxi to drive by. When it did, she cried out and began waving to its driver. The cab jammed on its brakes and she darted across the street. "Airport," she said breathlessly. "Hurry!"

The cab lurched forward, screeching past the Acme man. She had time to see the helpless look of surprise on his face as he sprang from his car. But there was nothing he could do. They were traveling the opposite direction from the way he was parked. As they came to the first intersection she looked back over her shoulder. She could see him running in the other direction toward the Airline Office. It had worked!

It wouldn't take him long to find the clerk who had waited on her. And if he was good at his job, he would be able to learn that she had just bought a ticket for Los Angeles. Having found that out, he should phone Shep. Shep would tell him to get out to the airport. And that, she thought triumphantly, would be that.

She waited until her cab driver turned the corner. Then she leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said, "I forgot something." She handed him a dollar bill. "Just let me out at the next stoplight."

"You want me to take you back, Miss?"

"No thanks. I'll be all right."

She opened the cab door and stepped onto the sidewalk. As soon as the cab had disappeared she took the airline ticket and tore it into small pieces. She put them in a trash basket and began walking to the bank, a half-block away.

She hesitated a moment inside the bank before walking over to the desk of Mr. Jonas, the man with whom she had talked yesterday. He smiled glumly as she came up. "Well, Mrs. Malden, you can't say we didn't take care of you on this business. You're a very lucky woman to get a check for such a large amount cashed so quickly. I hope you realize that."

"I do, Mr. Jonas," she said contritely. "Is it ready?"

"It's ready. It's packed in a money bag. Hundred dollar bills." Mr. Jonas shrugged and spoke into an intercom. "Mrs. Malden's here." He pushed a check toward her. "It's all made out. All you have to do is sign it."

She stared at the check. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars, payable to the order of the bank. Her hand trembled as she reached for a pen. "There you are," she said hoarsely.

Now that it was actually happening, it seemed like a dream. Her heart began racing wildly and she wondered suddenly if it wasn't *too* easy. Was the bank working, really, with Shep, and was she playing into their hands in some way she could not fathom? For an instant she had an almost uncontrollable impulse to run, but then she saw two bank guards approaching. One carried a moneybag, the other had his right hand resting casually on his

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holster. The one with the moneybag said, "Here you are, Mr. Jonas." He reached in his breast pocket and took out a slip of paper. Mr. Jonas unzipped the moneybag and peered inside. He signed the paper and pushed it and the moneybag across to her. "If you find everything to be in order, Mrs. Malden, just sign the receipt. Then the money's yours."

Carol touched the moneybag uncertainly. She pulled out the bills, staring at them greedily. She saw fifteen neat bundles of hundred dollar bills. She wet her lips. "It doesn't seem real."

She finished signing the papers, gave Jonas a dazzling smile, squeezed his hand and hurried off.

She hurried down the street and stopped at the first hat shop she saw. She went inside and bought a hat. Three minutes later she was on her way again, but now she was carrying a hatbox as well as the paper bag.

She hesitated on the corner nearest the parking lot. The Acme car had left, as she had known it would. She quickened her pace and gave her ticket to the parking-lot attendant. As soon as she was in the car she opened the hatbox and put the paper bag with the money in it. She dropped the hatbox on the floor of the backseat. Then she started for her house to pick up her suitcase. It was so simple, she thought, so simple, and she would be able to disappear without a trace. At the house she would pick up the suitcase, but more important than that, she would dye her hair black. Then let them try to find her.

The house and all the furniture belonged to George's creditors, so she lost nothing by leaving them. The car was hers, but it was mortgaged too; she didn't mind giving it up. She would use it to drive downtown again, park it on the street, and then ride a trolley to the bus station. She would buy her ticket to Houston, and when she got to Houston she would make her arrangements to get to Mexico. In Mexico the new life would start . . .

Twenty minutes later she turned onto her own street, slowing the car to turn into the driveway. Then, too late, she saw it. *A police cruiser was parked in front of the house.*

Her knuckles whitened on the wheel and she tried to sneak by without being seen. But as she flashed past a head popped out of the cruiser's window and a coarse voice shouted at her.

Her eyes went to the rearview mirror. She saw the agitated blur of two figures in the cruiser. A siren whined. A red spotlight flashed her. It was no use. They could catch her. She would have to stop.

The police car pulled in front, boxing her in. A man got out on the driver's side and walked back to her. It was the police sergeant she had met in the morning. He hunched his shoulders in the frame made by the car window and said in a tired, not unfriendly voice, "Now why was you trying to run away, Mrs. Malden?"

Her eyelids fluttered. "Run away? Really, Sergeant, you make it seem

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quite exciting. I'd just remembered something I had to pick up at the drugstore."

"I guess it'll wait, won't it?"

"I guess it will have to. What did you want?"

The sergeant beckoned to his companion. "Get the casts, Joe."

The other policeman opened the back door of the cruiser and brought out two elongated rubber strips. Wordlessly he walked past her to the rear of the car. Carol turned quickly to watch but he was out of sight. His voice floated up from street level. "Tires check perfect, Sarge."

The sergeant's manner changed abruptly. "You'll have to come down to Headquarters, Mrs. Malden."

"But . . . but . . ." She put a hand on the window frame. "I don't understand."

Frantically she thought of the money in the hatbox on the floor of the backseat. A bribe. She could offer them a bribe. A thousand dollars each to say they had missed her. It would give her enough time to get to the bus station. But could she trust them? If they were men who could be bribed for a thousand dollars, why should they settle for that once they saw what she had in the hatbox? And what if they couldn't be bribed. Her situation would be worse then than it was now.

The sergeant said, "Slide over, Mrs. Malden. We gotta take your *car* down too. Joe, you tail us."

Cigar and cigarette smoke blanketed Corsi's office with a blue haze, and on the other side of the haze she saw Corsi hunched over his desk, his sallow face and bony cheeks unflatteringly distorted by the harsh sunlight. In another corner a mournful, bald-headed man squatted behind a stenotype machine. Next to him stood a tall man nervously biting a pipestem. A familiar voice behind her said, "Don't forget me, Carol."

She whirled. "Shep!" she whispered. "So you're behind this!"

Corsi pounced on the words. "Behind what, Mrs. Malden?"

She turned on him, fiercely defensive. "What do you want with me? Why am I here?"

Cosi shrugged. "The man standing up, Mrs. Malden, is from the state attorney's office. Not our state, you understand. Across the line."

The man stepped forward, austerely polite. "Kipp is the name, Mrs. Malden."

"The man sitting down," Corsi said, "is Sergeant Donahue. As you can see, he's a police reporter. And you know Mr. Henderson and Sergeant Kelly." Corsi seemed bored. "That about does it. Everything you say will be taken down and can be used against you."

Her gaze moved automatically to the police reporter. His stubby fingers roamed the keys of the stenotype machine and his eyes were focused

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bleakly, like a blind man's, on the ceiling. She clutched her purse tightly. Her voice cracked. "What right do you have to be doing this to me?"

Corsi seemed to be admiring his manicure. "A state trooper on the other side of the line was murdered last night. Did you read about it, Mrs. Malden?"

She blanched. She had known the question was coming, she had rehearsed her story over and over, but all the rehearsal in the world could never prepare her for the moment itself. "Yes, I read about it."

Corsi was deceptively mild. "I'm not going to try and trick you. But the trooper was stationed at a washed-out bridge. Some tire imprints were found in the mud at the side of the road by the bridge. It looked as if a car had been stuck there. The boys tell me the tire marks match those on your car."

Somehow she forced a smile but perspiration was trickling down her armpits. The nape of her neck was wet. Her voice lacked conviction. "They probably match a good many cars."

"That's right. But are they yours? Yes or no?"

The question hung over her in the tiny room's hostile stillness like a sword suspended by a thread. She must not panic. "Yes," she said quietly, "they're mine."

Corsi's grim face relaxed and he allowed himself a brief, satisfied smile. "But you told me this morning," he said patiently, "that you were walking in the park last night."

"I told you I went for a drive last night. And I did. Because I had to get away from *that* house. I just started driving, going nowhere in particular, and I crossed the line. I turned down a side road and came to a washed-out bridge. I had to turn around, but in doing so, I got stuck. A trooper helped me get out of the mud. This morning I read about the murder of a trooper." She shrugged. "I didn't know he was the same one, and I didn't tell you about having been in that area for an obvious reason: I had troubles enough, I didn't want any more." She turned to Kipp and Shep. "Is there anything wrong with that? What difference would it have made? I didn't know anything. I'd never seen the trooper before in my life."

"Why didn't you report the trooper's murder if you had nothing to hide?"

Her voice rose defiantly. "I didn't know he had been murdered. He was alive when I saw him."

Corsi said sarcastically, "You don't really want to go on record with that story, do you, Mrs. Malden?"

"I've gone on record with it. Draw your own conclusions."

Corsi motioned to Kelly. "Call Smith," he said impersonally.

Kelly opened the door and beckoned to someone waiting outside. A shadow fell across the doorway. A man entered. Corsi interrogated him

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like a ringmaster leading a prize performer through his paces. "Well, is this the woman, Mr. Smith?"

The stranger peered at her furtively. His pink, blubbery lips parted to form a knowing smile. "That's her," he said eagerly. "She was stuck on the road about a mile from where I found the trooper. Awful nervous, she was, awful anxious to get rid of me."

Corsi said, "What about you, Mrs. Malden? You ever seen this man before?"

She nodded helplessly. "But you don't understand. I can explain everything."

"Start explaining, Mrs. Malden. That's what we're here for."

Her glance travelled quickly from face to face, but unfriendly eyes greeted her each way she turned. "This man —" she pointed to Smith, she could not look — "this man was drunk. I thought . . . I thought he was going to attack me."

Corsi persisted remorselessly, "But he found the body a mile down the road from where he first saw you. The body must have been there when you drove by."

"But it wasn't!" she cried. "It wasn't! It wasn't!"

"Take it easy, Mrs. Malden. I can hear you." His eyes caught hers and held them. "Let's assume the body wasn't there. Let's assume somebody killed the trooper after you left the bridge. Where did that somebody go? The bridge was out . . . No cars could travel in the opposite direction. And Smith didn't see any other cars between *you* and the *corpse*, did you, Smith?"

"No sir."

"I don't know," Carol said weakly. "Maybe the person who did it was on foot."

Corsi laughed cynically. "Sure. Why didn't *I* think of that." He signalled to Kelly again. "Bring Mitchem in."

Kelly opened the door and a moment later the young man from the inspection station stood there. He twisted his hat nervously and smiled awkwardly at Carol.

Corsi said, "This the lady, Mitchem?"

"Yes sir."

Corsi turned to Donahue. "Read back that testimony Mitchem gave us awhile ago. I want Mrs. Malden to hear it."

Donahue began skimming through the long rolls of the stenotype tape. He cleared his throat and began reading in a stilted monotone:

Lieutenant Corsi: All right, now this blonde woman came up. What happened next?

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Mr. Mitchem: *Well, we make spot checks on every fourth or fifth car, look in the trunk, and so on. I said I wanted to look in her trunk and she told me her mother was sick. I guess she meant she had to get home in a hurry.*

Lieutenant Corsi: *So you let her go?*

Mr. Mitchem: *Well, sir, as a matter of fact, we have instructions to let people through if they put up too big a fuss about the inspection. It isn't as if we were customs officers.*

Lieutenant Corsi: *Okay, nobody's criticizing you. I just want to establish the fact that she was in a hurry, that's all. Was she nervous, excited?*

Mr. Mitchem. *Well, like I said, she was anxious to get through. That part isn't too unusual. Now that I think of it, though, she kept looking down the road behind her.*

Lieutenant Corsi: *Did you see a gun in her car?*

Mr. Mitchem: *No sir, I certainly did not. If I'd seen a gun, I would have done something about it.*

Lieutenant Corsi: *What would you have done, Mitchem?*

Mr. Mitchem: *Well, I don't know what I would have done exactly. But I would have done something. People don't go around with guns without a pretty good reason.*

Corsi broke in again, "Okay, Donny, that'll do." To Mitchem and Smith he said, "That's all for you two right now. But wait outside. We might need you again."

When they had left the room, Corsi said acidly, "Well, Mrs. Malden?"

She fumbled in her purse for cigarettes. Then she stopped, afraid to light one. The trembling of her hands would give her away. "Well, what?" she answered lamely.

Corsi grinned at his audience. "Okay, Mrs. Malden, I'll give you that chance. I'll say you killed him. You were near the scene of the crime. You seemed to be running from it. You deny having seen the trooper's body in the road but you admit seeing him alive at the bridge. No cars could get through in the other direction. So who killed him? Spacemen?"

"I don't have to take these insults. And I won't." She started to get up, but his hand flicked out, shoving her back.

"*Sit down*, Mrs. Malden! You aren't going anywhere." Corsi turned to Kelly. "Tell Mac we got a customer for a paraffin test."

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"A paraffin test?" she whispered. "What . . . what's that?"

Corsi smiled obligingly. "It's a test, Mrs. Malden, to detect the traces of gunpowder on a person's hands. Anyone firing a gun gets powder marks on his —" he laughed — "or her fingers. If, as you claim, you're innocent, then you've nothing to worry about. There won't be any powder marks." His voice taunted her. "Will there?"

Carol slumped in her chair. A sob rose in her throat. "But . . . but . . ." The words tumbled out hysterically under the frantic demands of self-preservation. "But I *do* have powder on my hands. You see . . . you see, I shot at a dog last night." She clutched Corsi's arm. "Oh, I did. I really did. You *must* believe me!"

The words died away and the silence that followed was shrill and unbearable. Then the incongruous sounds of laughter broke the awful stillness, echoing harshly like a joke told in bad taste.

"It's true," she cried, "it's true."

"A dog?" Corsi said sarcastically. "What kind of a dog? A police dog." He smiled broadly at his own joke. "And where was this dog, Mrs. Malden? And the gun you used, where is it?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but there was nothing she could say. It must be a dream, it couldn't be happening to her. To be trapped by her own cleverness, to be faced with such impossible alternatives — she could not believe it; it had to be a dream. It couldn't end this way, it couldn't, not when the money was finally hers.

But the two choices she had were as sure and as real as the chances she had long ago lost. She could tell them *who* had killed the trooper. Oh, she could tell them. But if she did, then by her own lips she proved that George had been alive after the crash, after his insurance had expired. *And she would lose the money.* Or she could remain silent and pray that somehow a good lawyer — how much of her money would he take? — could defend her against the murder charge. But how could he defend her when two witnesses had seen her at the scene and she had gunpowder on her hands? Everything she had told them so far had been a lie; why should they believe her when she told the truth?

"Please," she said, "please . . ."

Corsi circled her cautiously, like a club fighter waiting for his opening. "Come on, Mrs. Malden. What'd you do with the gun? The one you used on the dog. Or do you need time to think about that, too?"

Quiet sobs shook her body. "I threw it away."

"Okay. Where?"

She put her hands to her face. "I don't know."

"You know the general area, don't you? After all, you don't throw guns away every night of your life."

"I'd never been there before. It was dark. Raining."

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"All right, where was the dog you shot at? And why were you shooting at him? After all, you were in a car. And why did you even have a gun? And for that matter, *why* did you throw it away? Because it was also the gun that killed the trooper? Is that why?"

Shep's voice broke in suddenly. "You're on the wrong track, Corsi. Let me talk to her."

Corsi turned on him angrily. "You just remember one thing, Henderson. You're here because *I* let you be here. If you want to feel sorry for her, feel sorry somewhere else. You've still got a few things to explain yourself."

Shep pushed himself forward from the shadows. His eyes avoided Carol's. "You've got a perfect case, Corsi. Except for one thing. Motive. Why would she kill the trooper? You've got to go in front of a jury — or had you forgotten? They'll want to know *why*."

"I suppose you can tell me *why*."

"I think I can. Let me talk to her."

Corsi leaned against the desk. He folded his arms. "Go ahead. You've got the floor."

Shep sighed. "Nobody can help you, Carol. Not any more."

"I didn't do it, Shep. Help me, please. Get me out of here. Get me a lawyer. Do something. Anything." Her hands clenched and unclenched. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell us who was with you in the car."

She gasped. "In the car?"

He grimaced. "You've got a choice, Carol. But not for long. A hundred and fifty thousand bucks won't do you any good in the deathhouse."

"So you're against me too."

He winced. "I'm not against you, Carol. Or for you. Let's just say I want to see justice done."

"Justice?" Her scornful laugh rang through the room. "What's that?"

"Not very much. But it might save you this time."

"I'm innocent."

"Who isn't?"

"You don't understand."

He shook his head. "We're boring Corsi, and Corsi's an impatient man. He wants a conviction as badly as you want the money. Think it over, Carol, but think it over fast. Time's running out. Only one thing can save you. The truth."

"What kind of build-up is that? You're trying to trap me. Ever since this thing started, you've been trying to trap me."

"You trapped yourself. Long ago." He reached nervously for a cigarette and his eyes swung back to Corsi. "There has to be a reason for her being on that road last night. I can give you a couple. The first is, she was on her way to meet someone."

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"Yeah, I know." Corsi yawned. "Her husband. Only he's dead. Except to all you fine fellows at Acme."

"I'm just giving you theories," Shep said. "The second is, she had already met her husband. He was in the car with her. They were driving to a safer hideout. They come to the bridge. It's washed out, so they have to turn around. Now what would it be that the trooper saw in their car that would make him take out after them? It was enough motive for murder."

"Okay, what was it?"

"I'll submit to you, it was a dead body."

"Whose?"

"Her husband's. She'd already killed him. That explains the gun. Maybe he was still propped up in the front seat. Or lying in the back seat. At first the trooper thought he was a man sleeping. Maybe she told him that. But after she'd driven off, maybe something registers he hadn't noticed at first. The pallor of his face. Or bloodstains on the upholstery. We'll never know what it was, but it must have been something like that. So he gives chase and cuts in front of her. That was the position of his car, remember, when Smith found his body. Well, he was right. There was a dead body in the car. For discovering that, he had to die, too." Shep spread his hands wearily. "Have a couple of your specialists go over her car with a fine toothcomb. Check the trunk. You'll find something there, maybe human hairs or bloodstains, to prove she had a body in that trunk when she came to the inspection station."

Corsi's laugh was short and raucous. "You're working awful hard, Henderson, to get out of paying that hundred and fifty grand. There's only one thing you forgot. We're not here to pull your chestnuts out of the fire. We've already got our case."

"You haven't got your motive. That's a legal element of the crime known as murder, isn't it?"

"Why don't you just let us worry about the legal end?" He turned to Kipp. "You satisfied?"

Kipp smiled thinly. "I'm satisfied, Lieutenant. We'll present a request for extradition. How long will it take to run it through?"

"A couple of days. Unless she wants to fight it."

"I assume you'll hold her."

Corsi nodded grimly. "She'll be right here. We've got nice accommodations on the fifth floor. Not all the rooms got a view but . . ."

Carol listened helplessly. They weren't bluffing, she knew that now. They could hold her and they could extradite her. Eventually they could send her to the chair. Quietly, hopelessly, she said, "I've changed my mind. I want to make a statement."

Corsi stopped talking. His nostrils quivered slightly. He signalled to the reporter. "Yes, Mrs. Malden."

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Mechanically, dully, she said, "I'll start at the beginning. Last night about seven o'clock, the phone rang. It was my husband. Yes, my husband." She turned bitterly to Shep. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? That's what you've been waiting for. Well, now you've got it." She shivered. "It was the first time I knew he was alive. I couldn't believe it. I thought it was a terrible practical joke. But it was no joke. I realized that soon enough."

Now that she had started, the words came out in a torrent. "He wanted me to meet him. He threatened to kill himself if I didn't. I had no one to turn to. And he *was* my husband. So I met him. But in the first three minutes with him I realized he was insane. He waved a gun at me. I realized that if I argued with him, he'd kill me. He ordered me to take the car across the state line; apparently he knew a spot over there where he thought he would be safe. That's how we got to the bridge.

"The trooper stopped us. I wanted to say something to him, but George had a gun in my ribs. Then, as we were turning around at the bridge, I got stuck in the mud. The trooper opened my door and took my place behind the wheel. I dropped my purse on the pavement so that he'd find it after we left and come after us."

She bit her lip, thinking frantically, desperate to give them a story they could believe. "When I saw the trooper's lights in our rearview mirror, I drove faster. I wanted him . . . I wanted him to arrest us. It was the only way I could save myself. Because George was raving at me by then, accusing me of infidelities, betrayals, schemes to cheat him . . .

"Finally the trooper caught up with us. He wanted to see my driver's license. George started arguing with him. George was half-delirious anyhow — from a bullet wound, I learned, the night of the crash. Then the trooper got mad. He said he was going to take us into the barracks." Her face twisted painfully. "That would have finished everything for George, because he was determined to get the insurance money. He couldn't afford to be arrested and identified." Her shoulders sagged and her voice could barely be heard. "George waited until the trooper wasn't looking. Then he shot him."

"And then what did George do? Hightail it into the night?"

"He couldn't. He was dead."

"Dead!" Corsi was taken aback, but not for long. "So your husband killed the trooper, and then you killed your husband. Is that it? How did you do it, Mrs. Malden? With a gun, or a knife, or with kindness?"

"He had a heart attack. Yes, a heart attack! Go ahead, Lieutenant, smirk all you want. I can prove it."

"Prove away, Mrs. Malden."

"George has had heart trouble for months. You can check with his doctor if you don't believe me. When he killed the trooper, the excitement was too much. He died instantaneously. You can have an autopsy performed.

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It'll prove I'm telling the truth. And there'll be powderstains on his hands, too, because *he* shot the trooper."

"And where is *his* body now?"

"I'm trying to tell you. When I realized what had happened, I was panic-stricken, but I had to get out of that place. I started for the state line, and then, as I came to the main highway, I remembered the inspection station. I stopped and tried to get George's body in the trunk."

"But why would you do that?" Corsi asked innocently. "You were going to report everything at the state line, weren't you?"

Meekly she said, "I was too frightened, too confused. I wanted to get back here, back to people I knew, back to people I thought could help me." She shook her head. She said, "I was wrong, of course, I know that now. But then it was different. The only thing I could think of was getting back across the line. So I stopped to put George's body in the trunk. That's when Mr. Smith came along."

She grimaced. "You already know how I got rid of Mr. Smith and you know how I got back across the line. By then, though, I had regained my senses enough to head into town to a police station. I happened to turn on the radio and learned for the first time what had happened to Hart, Hart McIntire." She glanced at Shep. "So, with Hart dead, with my husband dead, with Mr. Henderson accusing me of trying to defraud the insurance company, I lost my nerve again. I was afraid to go to the police. I had to have time to think. I was wrong, but too many terrible things had been happening. I was pretty sure that Mr. Henderson would try to involve me in Hart's visit to Mr. Clump. I just couldn't stand the thought of getting involved with the trooper's murder too. And I didn't see what good it would do society if I did. His killer was already dead."

"Give us the next episode, Mrs. Malden. I'm still waiting to hear what happened to your husband's body."

"I drove out to the quarry on the Lonesome Valley Road."

Corsi gasped. "You dumped his body in the quarry?"

"I threw the gun away there too. That's where the dog attacked me."

"Did you know there's a law against disposing of dead bodies? Not to mention concealing evidence of a crime."

She shrugged. "I'm aware now that I probably violated a good many laws last night. But one thing I didn't do. I didn't kill the trooper." Perspiration was trickling maddeningly into her eyes, and she brushed it away guiltily. "Of course, I don't expect you to believe me, Lieutenant. But the body is in the quarry. You won't find any bullet in it, I assure you."

"We probably won't find any body either. You picked a good place when you picked the quarry. What do you think it is, a bathtub we can drain just by pulling a plug?" Corsi turned to Kipp. "You ever heard a story like that before?"

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Kipp shook his head disinterestedly. "We'll still extradite. She can present her defense in court."

Carol cried out frantically. "Shep, don't let them do it! You believe me, don't you? You have to!"

"Sure. You say George was alive yesterday. Okay, he was alive."

Carol clutched Corsi's arm. "You have to believe me!"

Corsi disengaged her hand. He stared curiously at the sweat-mark left on his sleeve by her frenzied grip. The remorselessness of his voice was softened for the first time by pity. "I don't believe anything you tell me, Mrs. Malden. Not any more."

"Oh no!" she cried helplessly. She put her hands to her face. "Please," she cried, "take me out to the quarry. I'll show you where . . . where it happened. Please. I can prove he was alive. That he did it."

Corsi rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He glanced at his watch. "Okay," he said, "okay, we'll go out there. Kelly, you get us a patrol car. Mrs. Malden can come with us. You take her Chrysler. We'll see if she left any tire marks out by the quarry. She probably did. She seems to think of everything."

Carol stood up, clutching the chair for support. They would have to believe her. There *would* be tire marks. And she would get them to drag the quarry and retrieve George's body. She knew doctors had ways to tell if a man had died from a heart attack. And if he had drowned after death, they could tell whether the heart attack or the drowning had killed him.

Blindly she groped her way from the room. Her legs wobbled crazily. In the outer office she had a fleeting impression of a slim, black-haired girl sitting on the bench and looking at her strangely from melancholy eyes. Then the girl's glance went to Shep and Shep grimaced. "Hello, Nancy."

Her voice echoed his tonelessly. "Hello, Shep."

"We're going out to the Lonesome Valley quarry. You might as well tag along. And you can phone your paper." He shrugged wearily. "Yeah, it's all over. The headline is, YOUNG WIDOW FINGERS HUSBAND FOR TROOPER'S MURDER. On the next bank you follow with, INSURANCE FRAUD EXPOSED. And four men are dead." His smile was bleak. "You think it'll increase circulation?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PATROL CAR WAS parked at the edge of the road and behind it was the black Chrysler. Carol stood by the Chrysler's rear door, helplessly watching the activities of the men who had brought her here. Shep and Kipp were on the edge of the hill, examining the slope leading steeply down to the

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brownish slime of the quicksand in the quarry bed. Kipp grunted. "You can't tell much here. A body might have rolled down. It might not." He shouted over his shoulder to Corsi. "Maybe tomorrow we can get some equipment out here. Drag the bed. See what we turn up. It shouldn't be too hard."

Corsi was on his knees examining the grass. He didn't look up. "Won't do any good. A five-year-old kid fell in the pit a year ago. We knew the exact spot where he went in but we never found him. Must be an underground current of some kind. Only way you could do it, is empty the damn thing. It's about fifteen feet deep. It'd cost about ten thousand bucks. We looked into it when the kid fell in." Corsi stood up. "We don't have ten thousand bucks to pour down a rathole. You fellows want to do it, okay, but it's got to be your money."

Kipp shook his head. "Not us. We've got a case without spending any ten thousand bucks of the taxpayer's money. If we had that kind of dough to throw around, we'd give it to the trooper's widow." Kipp started back to the road. "Mrs. Malden said she didn't pull the trigger. Let her spend the ten thousand to find the man who did."

Carol listened, petrified. Her eyes widened in disbelief. Her voice faltered. "You aren't . . . you aren't going to look for the body?"

Kipp returned the agonized glance impersonally. He glanced quickly at his watch, as if he was worried about getting home. "Look, Mrs. Malden, what good do you think it would do you, even if there was a body? How would that prove you didn't pull the trigger?"

Pathetically she cried out, "But there would be gunpowder on *his* hand too."

Kipp jerked his head in the direction of the quarry. "After forty-eight hours in that place? Besides, even if there was, it wouldn't help you. Not in my book. Maybe your husband did die the way you said. But you could have killed the trooper and then put the gun in your husband's dead hand and squeezed the trigger. That would leave gunpowder on his hands too."

"But only two bullets were fired from the gun. George shot the trooper with one, I shot at the dog with the other."

Kipp raised an eyebrow skeptically. "That so? It's pretty hard to prove, though, isn't it? What are you going to do, get a statement from the dog?"

"You can ask the people in the house. They must have heard the shot."

"Okay, so we ask them. How do we know there were only *two* shots fired? The gun's down there, isn't it?"

"But I'm telling you. That's how you know. I wouldn't lie. My God, not now." She turned wildly to Shep. "You'll dredge the pit, won't you, Shep?"

"Me?" His eyes met hers briefly and then he turned his back on her. Somberly he said, "No, Carol, I'm not going to do any dredging."

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"But —" her voice rose insistently on the wings of a new terror — "you have to find the body so that you can get out of paying me."

He turned reluctantly. "You've already admitted he was alive last night, Carol. What better proof is there than that?"

She put her hands to her face. "But you're not going to let them do this to me, Shep. You were my husband once. You know that I didn't kill George. That I didn't kill the trooper." Her hands dropped lifelessly to her sides and her tear-stained face sought his. "Oh, I'm no angel and I've cheated and lied and sinned and when I die I'll surely go to Hell. But murder is something else." She braced her head against the window frame. Her voice pierced the summer stillness. "I'm innocent, innocent, innocent . . ." Her voice trailed away, like a small girl's exhausting itself in tantrums.

"Maybe you are. I can't tell any more. I'm not even sure you can."

"But they'll send me to the electric chair."

Quietly, without malice, he said, "You'll have your day in court. Sometimes they go light on a woman. A life sentence, ninety-nine years. You'd be eligible for parole in thirty years."

"Thirty years!" The words burst from her lips in a hysterical wail. "Not thirty years," she pleaded, "oh, not that! I'd be old, almost sixty. I'd be ugly. Poor . . ."

Shep backed away uncomfortably. "I can't help you, Carol. Nobody can. Not any more."

"But all I wanted," she whispered brokenly, "was a little happiness."

He nodded passively. "Yeah, I know. I know what you wanted." He shrugged and shook his head slowly. He glanced at Nancy, standing over by the road. Finally he said, "What about the money, Carol? Is it still in the bank?"

The question reacted on her like an electric shock. The money! Why, she still had the money. It was still in the back seat of the car, in the hatbox. Her eyes darted quickly from Shep to the other men watching and listening from a distance. Could she somehow get in the car and escape, even now? From the corner of her eye she could see the keys dangling from the dashboard. What would they do, she wondered, if she tried to drive off?

No, it would never work. The patrol car was parked in front. They could stop her before she could back up and get away. But desperation gave her an idea. "No," she said indifferently, "it's not in the bank."

"Where is it?"

Slowly, imperceptibly, she turned the handle of the back door, covering the movement with her body. She kept talking, stalling for time. "It won't do you much good, will it, to end up losing the money after all this? But that's what might happen."

"Where is it?" he said again grimly.

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"Why do you want it so badly? What good does it do you? It's not your money. Does it make you rich? Proud? Respected?"

Ah, she had the car door open now. A few inches would be enough. She could stoop quickly, grab the hatbox by the leather strap, and throw it out over the quarry before he could stop her. In a matter of seconds it would hit the quicksand. And sink. There was a sweet revenge here, but she was not insane; there was a method in her madness. The box would sink, and the insurance company, then, would drag the quarry. Oh, they would drag the quarry all right then. They would have to if they wanted their money. And in the process they would recover George's body. And the gun.

With George's body and the gun she could prove her story was true.

She half-turned, pretending to be feeling for pebbles in her shoe. Using her body as a shield, she felt for the hatbox. Ah, there. She had it. She grasped the strap and held her breath. She spun around quickly. Now! The unexpected movement had caught them by surprise. Somebody shouted a warning, but he was too late. She ran through the weeds, swinging her arm back, gaining momentum.

Corsi shouted hoarsely, "Get her!"

Shep hurled himself at her. She saw him coming and sidestepped, but momentum carried her on. His arms and legs crashed hard against her. The hatbox flew from her hand. Her legs shot from under her and she felt herself slipping. She screamed, clawing air, somehow aware that level ground had left her and that she was tumbling, out of control, down the muddy slope to the quicksand pool. She reached frantically for a shrub, a bush, a protruding boulder, but the earth was wet and nothing held. Dimly, vaguely, she saw Shep's body tumbling too, his knees tucked into his body.

Her momentum increased and the slime stretched beneath her. Then, suddenly, there was the quick, cold sting of wetness and she was floundering in quicksand a foot, two feet from the bank. Her legs pushed futilely against the sucking ooze. "Save me!" she screamed.

Shep, by a miracle, had caught onto something. Six feet away, he stared at her numbly.

"Save me, Shep!" she cried. The quicksand tugged from below and she sank a little more. Shep scrambled to his knees, crawling toward her.

Then, too terrified to scream, she saw that he was not headed for her. He was after the hatbox. He edged himself, painfully and slowly, to the farthermost point of solid earth and poked out with his foot, trying to touch the hatbox. Above she could see the others scrambling down the bank.

"Shep," she gasped, "I'm going under!" The quicksand was up to her waist. She held an arm high, as if reaching for the stars.

"Get the girl!" one of the men shouted.

Shep's foot made uncertain contact with the hatbox and worked it slowly to the bank. He put out a hand and tugged. The box left the slime

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and the quicksand closed over the vacuum with a greedy sucking noise. Shep fell back against the bank.

Corsi was there now. He put out a hand toward her. She bent her arm toward his and made contact. His wiry fingers closed around hers. She could feel him pulling. "Hold on!" he said grimly.

Bit by bit, second by second, her fingers were slipping away. She laughed hysterically, conscious that nothing could save her. It was too late. Everything was always too, too late. "Thanks," she whispered bitterly, "thanks for nothing."

The merciless slime closed around her.

Shep clambered up the slope, dragging the hatbox behind him. He limped painfully to the edge of the road. Corsi followed him.

Corsi said, "You got your money."

Shep turned on him angrily. "You're not the only one with a job to do." His face was ashen, but his voice rang. "What are you giving yourself medals for? Did you want to save her or did you want to let her die your way, with a rigged-up trial and pictures in the papers and publicity for the cops. Is that civilization?" He wiped a muddy arm across his face. "Nobody lives forever. Nobody gets what he wants. Carol Malden didn't die down there. She died back in your office, when she lost the only thing she wanted."

"Some speech, Henderson. But you've got to live with something you'll never forget. You could have saved her."

"Nobody could save Carol Malden, Corsi. It's something you'd never understand." He grimaced bitterly and walked over to Nancy. His eyes sought hers and she stared back at him mutely. Her silhouette was poised, still and nerveless, like a statue's, against the sky. He knew it was useless but he had to try and he said hopelessly, "Coming, Nancy?"

THE END

A slightly expanded, hard-cover version of "Hunt the Man Down," by William Pearson, will soon be released by Simon and Schuster. Watch for it at your local bookstore.

Next month's thrilling issue of MMB-M will feature "Epitahh for a Virgin," by Robert Arthur (for details. see back cover). Use the coupon below to subscribe.

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MYSTERY PUZZLE: The Missing Necklace

INSPECTOR GOLDSMITH HUNG UP THE phone, looked ruefully at the papers on his desk, and sighed. He did not, somehow, seem to have much uninterrupted time at home to take care of his personal affairs. True, there were still a good two weeks until his tax return was due — but the Inspector was not a man who liked to wait till the last minute.

On the other hand, Bob Tillstrom was an old, old friend, and if he'd been burglarized, the Inspector wanted to help.

Tillstrom met the Inspector at the door, and led him around the side of the house to a flagstone terrace in the rear, where he pointed out the broken window by which the burglar presumably had made his entry.

Shards of glass glinted in the sun over an area extending three feet from the house. There was also glass on the low sill, inside and out.

"About a week ago, a bushy-haired chap in paint-stained dungarees was around the neighborhood asking for odd-jobs," Tillstrom said. "Could he have been casing us?"

The Inspector nodded. "That's possible. Let's go inside, now."

There was a strong smell in the hall outside the library. "Varnish," Tillstrom explained. "My son did this floor last night. He didn't know I was in the library when he started, and when I came out, after putting the necklace in the safe, he was up to the door. His girl chose that moment to phone him, and he left me to finish the job."

The Inspector looked at the gleaming, unmarked floor and grinned. "It's easy to see who runs this house," he said, opening the library door.

"We've touched nothing," Tillstrom commented. "The only thing missing is the diamond necklace I had just bought for Anne. Our anniversary is tomorrow."

The open safe contained two small bundles of bonds, a metal box, and a few bulky envelopes stuffed with policies and other personal papers. A thin, even, undisturbed coat of dust lay over everything.

The Inspector walked to the broken window, stooped, and picked up one tiny piece of glass. "You'd better get this vacuumed, Bob," he said. "There might be other fragments here. By the way, was the necklace insured?"

"No," Tillstrom said, "there hadn't been time."

"Sorry to hear it," the Inspector said soberly. A corner of his mouth twitched slightly. "At the same time, I hope you have hospitalization insurance — you may be about to need it."

What did the Inspector mean? For solution, *see page 128.*

— J. A. KRIPPER

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James Lewis Proctor II had a talent for arithmetic. But the amiable young man couldn't seem to make his personal books balance until he hit on a scheme to defraud the United States Government. His simple method involved a social security card, a driver's license, a post-office box — and dozens of income tax forms. And until a clerical error in Albany tripped him up, James Lewis Proctor was . . .

THE MAN WHO BEAT THE INCOME TAX

by James Running

JAMES LEWIS PROCTOR II LATER SAID he didn't remember when he hit on the fantastic scheme that was to send him to McNeil Island federal prison. The pleasant, 26-year-old college-trained accountant may well have conceived the idea while he was employed by the Internal Revenue Service, checking income tax returns.

He was hired early in 1954 at the Portland, Oregon, district office as a temporary worker during the seasonal rush.

His task there, together with that of other calculating machine operators, was to confirm the mathematical accuracy of returns flooding the office in anticipation of the March 15 deadline. The clerks' primary concern was not with the validity of deductions or refunds but whether the taxpayer had correctly added and subtracted the figures he had put down.

When Proctor — a three-year navy veteran, honorably discharged as a yeoman — applied for the government job, he blandly lied that he had a bachelor of arts degree in business administration from the University of Washington.

Actually, the glib young man had spent two years at Clark County Junior college in Vancouver, Washington, where he had studied accounting and office machines.

With his engaging personality, Proctor had little difficulty getting jobs — office manager for a Vancouver construction company, mechanic at a John Day, Oregon,

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garage, attendant at a Portland service station. His personal habits were good. He seldom drank and he did not gamble. He married the slim, petite daughter of a respectable Vancouver family. But he could not seem to hold his jobs long. And he liked the good life of golf, tennis, fishing and travel.

Proctor worked only two or three days for Internal Revenue before he walked off the job. His employment was terminated February 9. And the next day this young man, who had no police record and had never used an alias, took steps to establish himself as Allen Carl Adams.

In the next four months, as "Adams," Proctor collected more than $13,000 in refunds on twenty-two fictional tax returns filed in twenty-two different districts throughout the country — before a clerical error in the Albany, New York, office exploded what was very nearly a successful, gigantic swindle of the United States Government.

The day after the government removed him from the payroll, Proctor applied for and was issued a Social Security card in the name of Allen Carl Adams. Again posing as Allen Carl Adams, he applied for an Oregon driver's license. And he rented a box in the Portland post office under the same name.

To rent a box, you have to fill out an application, listing residence address and the names of two references. Proctor (who actually lived in Vancouver) boldly gave his address as that of a real Carl Adams living on Southeast 48th Avenue in Portland. From the telephone book, Proctor picked out the names of two neighbors of the real Adams and offered them as references. For some reason, neither answered the Post Office inquiries as to Adams character — perhaps they didn't know him. Proctor, informed by a notice in his box, coolly mumbled some excuse and gave the box clerk the names of two more references, again picked from the telephone book.

Both replied this time, and although one stated, "Not acquainted with anyone this name," the other, in response to the question of whether he knew Adams, wrote, "Yes. Allen Adams a very fine man." This one high recommendation referring, of course, to the real Adams, was enough to satisfy the box clerk.

Proctor then filed his first two tax returns under his new identity, Allen C. Adams, mailing one to the district office at Wichita, Kansas, and the other to the district office at Oklahoma City. Next day he sent out five more returns. In the space of a month — always using the same name, Allen C. Adams or Allen Carl Adams — he mailed returns to 39 of the nation's 64 Internal Revenue service districts. On each, he requested a $650 refund.

How did he collect without leaving Portland? Easy. He designated as his "temporary" address the

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Portland post office box that had carefully been rented in advance. To allay suspicion about the box address in a distant city, he put down as his permanent address that of a real Adams living in the district in which he filed. These addresses he got from telephone books on file in the Portland city library. He also got the name of a bona fide business in each case to credit as his employer.

The W-2 forms were about the easiest of all to fake. It was simple to fill one out showing employe-withheld taxes as if the form had been made out by an employer. Proctor did not steal the blanks when he worked at internal revenue. They're easily obtainable simply by identifying oneself as a bookkeeper and asking for them. Proctor got his at the branch Internal Revenue office in Vancouver.

Turning out W-2 forms and matching individual tax returns wholesale, Proctor never bothered to change the figures, since each return was going to a different district. He didn't even change his occupation — it was always "buyer." The only thing he had to change was his employer.

Proctor used library reference books for the names of schools to which he had himself given generous $200 contributions in each of the 39 districts in which he filed. He always made $500 contributions to churches and $100 gifts to hospitals, the names of which again were gleaned from telephone books. In Oregon it was Columbia hospital at Astoria; in Kentucky, Children's hospital in Louisville. Perhaps he thought it looked more genuine or maybe he was just getting lazy; whatever the reason, the same hospital that received the charity contribution also got huge "medical expenses" of $617.91. Presumably, some of the three fictional children listed on his returns incurred the expenses in the Kentucky hospital.

Proctor actually does have a daughter, now three years old, but no other children. He also boldly listed his mother, "Mamie," as a dependent, although she died in 1935. (His father, a government employe, lives in Seattle.)

Shrewdly, to avoid the need of getting another signature on the returns, "Adams" described himself as "widower" and to be certain there was no misunderstanding he wrote in the blank reserved for spouse's name, "Wife died — 1949."

So there couldn't be any easy, immediate checking, Proctor invariably listed another district as the one in which he had filed his tax return the previous year, but plausibly, it was always a neighboring state. For the social security number required on the return, he had the card carefully acquired in advance under the name Adams.

His income was always $9870 of which $1561.82 had been withheld. But the heavy contributions to hospitals, colleges and churches,

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plus medical expenses, interest, state taxes and fire or theft losses, boosted his deductions way over the 10 per cent automatically allowed. It figured out to an exact $650 refund.

Only one doctor, carefully identified by name and address, was listed on each return under medical expenses, but the figure was always the same, a flat $250. He saw no need for going to the trouble of names and addresses for nurses; the deduction was simply described, "Nurses, $350."

Proctor apparently decided it wasn't necessary to detail smaller charity gifts, either. No matter what the state, he wrote "Misc. Organized Drives, $150.00."

For a man so generous with colleges and churches, "Adams" had some mighty big personal loans, judging from his "personal loan interest" deduction of $112.09. His "mortgage interest" at $365.83 was more realistic.

Losses were easily fictionalized. On one of his first returns, Proctor itemized as "stolen, uninsured" a wrist watch, $145; camera, $120.50, and cash, $26. But on later returns (apparently getting lazy), he just lumped the total, $291.50, and changed the loss to "Clothing and furniture destroyed by fire 7-15-53."

In the margin across the top of the return or down the side — sometimes both — Proctor boldly instructed in his beautiful penmanship, "Please mail refund to temporary address: P.O. Box 4293, Portland 8, Oregon."

Sometimes, apparently to make it look like a genuine afterthought, he drew a line through what he had put down in the proper blanks as his permanent address and scratched in with studied carelessness his "temporary" Portland address. He often drew arrows calling attention to the Portland address as further insurance that it would not be overlooked. It was, after all, the key to his whole scheme. And the fact that an Internal Revenue service clerk did overlook this instruction on one of the returns — a mistake which eventually led to exposure of the fraud — bore out Proctor's double care in calling attention to his temporary address.

It was several weeks after he quit his job at Internal Revenue and set his scheme in motion, before the $650 checks began arriving. Proctor worked a week at a Portland service station and then drove to Southern California for a reason he never did explain. And while there, at Covina, near Arcadia, he made a $5 deposit in renting a typewriter. And in signing the receipt, he used the phony name of Adams.

For some reason, Proctor did not return the typewriter. As it turned out, his petty theft of the typewriter became one of the links in the chain that eventually caught him up in his far more lucrative tax scheme. . . .

Back in Portland, Proctor now

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had the fat refund checks rolling in. Cashing them was no problem. He had forseen that hurdle in making one of his first acts the securing of a driver's license for identification.

When tellers at the Portland banks where Proctor cashed the checks asked for more identification, he gave the address and telephone number of the Adams he had used in renting the post office box. The canceled checks which eventually came into the hands of Frank J. Kenney, special agent in charge of the United States secret service in Oregon, show that in many instances the bank clerks had written this address and telephone number below Proctor's phony indorsement as "Adams."

Proctor opened neither checking nor savings accounts. Like a small boy who has robbed his mother's purse to buy candy, he began fulfilling suppressed desires with his $100 bills.

He went on a traveling binge, flying to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He hopped off to Detroit for two weeks, living luxuriously in a downtown hotel and spending most of his time playing golf. He bought $200 worth of golfing equipment, $150 of fishing equipment, a sleeping bag, a camp cot, an air mattress, a tent, a baseball glove and bat, a .22-caliber Colt pistol, a Springfield rifle, hip boots, two tennis rackets and a box of tennis balls, a $52.50 wrist watch, bathing trunks, a pair of track shoes. He flew to New Orleans, stayed a week at the St. Charles hotel, and paid $2975 for a new Mercury automobile which he drove back to Portland.

To his dubious credit, however, he did use some of his tax refund money to settle up old personal and family debts, and deposited $500 in a checking account in a Vancouver bank under the name of his wife.

When she asked about his new car, he said it belonged to his employer. He told her he had a new job as salesman selling "good will advertising." There had been a marital rift and she had moved in with her parents in Vancouver and filed for divorce. But there was a reconciliation, she dropped the suit and they were in the process of moving into a new house in Vancouver on August 23, 1954, when Postal Inspector Stanley Smoot arrested him. It had taken some down-to-earth police work to find "Allen Adams" . . .

Not all the districts had swallowed "Adams' " tax returns hook, line and sinker. Some, mildly suspicious, had written for more information, requests which, of course, Proctor studiously ignored. Seventeen of the districts, however, dispatched checks almost immediately from their own disbursing offices. Five other districts instructed Portland to pay the claims.

The record shows the Portland disbursing office mailed five checks totaling $3251.92 to "Allen C. Adams, P.O. Box 4293, Portland 8,

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Oregon" on March 15 and 21, April 23 and 26 and May 7. (The $1.92 was more than Proctor asked for. It was the 6 per cent interest required by law when a refund is not paid within 30 days of the filing deadline, which in 1954 was March 15.)

Despite the proximity of payments to the same person from the same Portland office, there still was no suspicion. What tripped Proctor was the clerical mistake in the Albany, New York, district internal revenue service office. The refund check Proctor asked for in the return he mailed to New York inadvertently was sent to the real Adams in Albany (whose address Proctor had picked out of the telephone book) instead of to the "temporary" address in Portland. The real Adams, whose initials were different, returned the check to the government, explaining that Allen C. Adams was "not known and not here."

Albany asked Internal Revenue in Oregon to check on "Allen C. Adams, P.O. Box 4293, Portland." The box rental application was dug from the files and quickly turned up the real Portland Adams, who of course knew nothing of what had been going on. To complicate the matter, the box rent had run out July 1 and Proctor had not renewed.

Their suspicions now aroused, Internal Revenue Intelligence agents queried all 64 districts as to whether they had paid refunds to an Allen C. Adams. When the answers came back that many had and the agents realized they had a slick operator on their hands, it also became quickly apparent why "Adams" had not renewed his box rental . . .

When the Covina typewriter agency didn't get its machine back, it complained to Arcadia police, giving the cops what little information it had — the "Allen C. Adams" signature and the number of his driver's license. This the clerk had jotted down on the receipt that "Adams" signed for the typewriter.

The Arcadia police chief, on the strength of the Oregon driver's license number, wrote Portland police on the slim chance that the suspect might be known in Portland. Portland Detective Robert McKeown, in checking out the name, found that an Allen C. Adams had rented a Portland post office box. He asked Postal Inspector Stanley Smoot for help. McKeown said he didn't have the manpower to "sit" on the box. And although there appeared to be no federal offense involved, Smoot offered to "plug" it.

And so when the next letter arrived for "Adams," the clerk held it and left a notice for him to pick up his mail at the window.

One can imagine Proctor's thoughts when he made a routine call for his mail and found the notice, never guessing it stemmed from the petty typewriter theft rather than from his multi-thousand-dollar tax fraud. He did not, of

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course, go to the window. He never went near the box again. It was late in June, about a week before Albany internal revenue had queried Portland about "Adams." Unwittingly, the Arcadia police chief's request had eliminated what would have been a perfect opportunity for Internal Revenue to trap the suspect, simply by assigning an agent to "sit" on Box 4293 and wait for the man who eventually would come with his key to get his mail.

Instead, Internal Revenue Intelligence men were faced with the problem of finding a man (whose name they did not know) whom they believed (but were not certain) was living among Portland's 400,000 residents.

At this point, the post office inspection service was officially called into the case because of increasing evidence of mail fraud.

Postal Inspector Smoot and his assistants, on the theory that "the guy had to live some place," called hundreds of apartment houses in Portland to inquire about an Allen Adams.

This detective work did turn up a real Adams and for some time he was a strong suspect. His handwriting was similar to that on the post office box application and check indorsements. And in some details he fitted the meager description, provided by the post office box rental clerk, of the "Adams" who had rented the box.

What appeared to be the most promising clue of all was "Adams'" driver's license number, provided by the Arcadia police chief . . .

In his application for a driver's license, Proctor had made a small error. To the secretary of state's office in Portland, he drove a car that formerly had been his — a 1951 Studebaker now registered as his wife's, because her parents had taken it over after he had been unable to make the payments.

Proctor passed the eye test and written examination. In the course of the road test, the driving examiner, as is customary, jotted down the Washington vehicle license number of the Studebaker on the processing papers.

But in walking with the papers to the cashier's window to pay the fee for his driver's license, Proctor managed to smear the penciled vehicle license number to make it almost illegible. His mistake was that he didn't do a thorough job. Only the three middle figures were obliterated. Left was a barely discernible 22 — G. Revenue agents learned this when they wrote the secretary of state at the state capital for information his office had about Oregon driver's license No. 352–60–719 and received all papers in the files bearing on the license.

The federal investigators now had the best clue to date. "G" is the Washington vehicle license designation for Clark county and Vancouver, just across the Columbia river from Portland.

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Dr. Homer Harris of the Oregon state crime laboratory agreed to try to bring out the smeared, missing figures with infrared light. He succeeded. But it was several days after he took the project. And by the time Dr. Harris called Inspector Smoot at his office to report success (the missing figures were 029), Smoot had his man. A purely circumstantial incident led to the quick capture . . .

Without waiting for Dr. Harris to complete his laboratory investigation, the postal inspector studied Washington vehicle registrations. Among the 1000 cars in the group from 22,000 to 22,999, he found there were 22 Studebakers. Smoot launched the tedious task of checking out the 22 owners, going to their homes and interviewing them.

Studebakers with Washington licenses beginning with "22" became almost an obsession with the inspector, particularly one whose owner he had never been able to find at home, even on several calls. So when Smoot — about a quarter of a mile from his own Portland residence late one afternoon while returning home from work — saw the elusive license flash by, he could scarcely believe his eyes.

He followed the Studebaker all the way to Vancouver and to the home of its owner — and was a little surprised to find that his quarry was a woman, a Latin teacher in a Portland high school, although she lived in Vancouver.

The teacher was quickly eliminated as a suspect, although indirectly she led to Proctor's apprehension. No one but herself had access to her car, the teacher said. Nevertheless, he left his telephone number.

Next day she called Smoot. A study of her records, she said, showed that six months earlier her car had been in a Vancouver garage for repairs. The February date was the same day that the elusive Adams had taken his driver's examination!

Her car had been in Hannah Motors in Vancouver, the teacher said. Smoot hustled over to talk to the garage owner, Bill Hannah. Hannah looked up his records and found that the Studebaker had been taken over to Portland that day for some paint work. This really looked hot!

Careful checking, however, accounted for the car every minute. Smoot, with another lead falling flat, growled to Hannah that somewhere in Vancouver there was a phony who drove a Studebaker. "Do you know of anyone?" he asked.

"Well, there's that young fellow Proctor," Hannah volunteered. "He's trying to beat me out of $500."

Smoot pricked up his ears. Proctor, the garage owner continued, had given a $500 check as down payment on a 1951 Studebaker. Somehow, the check never got deposited and Proctor, armed with the receipt he had received, refused to give Hannah another check.

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The inspector asked to see the purchase contract. One glance and Smoot knew he had his man. The handwriting matched with "Adams."

Hannah said he understood the Proctors recently had been divorced and referred Smoot to her parents. When the inspector called at their home, the mother came to the door. Smoot asked if she knew the whereabouts of her "ex-son-in-law."

"He's no longer 'ex'," she replied pleasantly. "Would you like to come in and speak to my daughter?"

Mrs. Proctor soon appeared and explained that she and her husband had been living with her parents but were just now moving into a home of their own that they had rented.

"Jim is over with a load of furniture but should be back any minute," she said.

Smoot said he'd wait. An hour and a half went by and the inspector began to get suspicious. He suggested that he might drive over to see what was holding things up. Mrs. Proctor gave him the address.

Proctor had been delayed, Smoot found, because a telephone man had come to install the phone in their new home. The inspector introduced himself. He explained his mission. Proctor professed great innocence.

"You'd better jump in my car and we'll drive down to the sheriff's office and talk this over," said Smoot.

On the way down, the gray-haired inspector told his passenger, "This is the end of the road." Proctor remained silent. "It's no use trying to fool me," Smoot continued. "Isn't that right, CARL ADAMS?"

Proctor "kind of blinked" but "took it much better than I expected," Smoot said later. His long-sought quarry replied quietly, "I knew I couldn't get away with it forever."

At the office of the intelligence division of the Internal Revenue service in Portland, Proctor made a full confession. He politely answered every question put to him by intelligence agents and Smoot.

When asked how much of the $13,009.87 (the $9.87 was interest added to the checks by the government) he had left, Proctor replied, "Approximately $700."

He told his interrogators it was in the Mercury, under the floor mat. The agents stepped outside to the automobile and found seven $100 bills where their co-operative prisoner directed.

"Do you have any other money left of the checks you received from the government?" Proctor was asked.

"Yes, $43 . . . Excuse me, $45." He was referring to money in his billfold.

Toward restitution of the fraudulently cashed checks, agents kept the $43 and also recovered the $500 that Proctor had put in the bank

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account for his wife. The Internal Revenue service auctioned off the new Mercury for $2180 and also sold, for about $200, the sporting equipment he had bought. For the balance owed, the government filed a lien against any other property Proctor may have or acquire.

Smoot describes Proctor as a "pretty smart kid." Born in Poplar, Montana, he is three-eighths Indian, a member of the Sioux tribe and a ward of the government on record with the Fort Peck Indian agency at Fort Peck, Montana. Through heirship, he owns Indian-allotted land in Roosevelt county, Montana. He attended grade school at Poplar, the Indian school at Chilocco, Oklahoma, and Camas, Washington, high school. He uses the "II" after his name because he has a relative with the same name . . .

Assistant United States District Attorney Robert Carney filed an information in Portland federal court charging Proctor with five counts of filing false tax returns, one count of mail fraud and one count of cashing a forged government check.

He was held in jail in lieu of $15,000 bail. To defend him, the judge appointed Alan Davis, one-time FBI agent who also serves frequently as a pro tempore Multnomah county, Oregon, circuit court judge.

On September 18, 1954, Proctor pleaded guilty. On October 11, when he appeared for sentencing, Attorney Davis pleaded with the court, "This boy isn't a criminal." The lawyer apparently was referring to the fact that no violence was involved in the crime. Although "quite a bit of money was taken," the ex-FBI agent begged, nothing would be gained by making an example of him.

Judge McColloch, who could have given Proctor 40 years and a $7000 fine, set the prison sentence at one year. Minnie Proctor wept . . .

How did Proctor get away as long as he did with such a widespread swindle of the government — a scheme that was exposed, ironically, by an error in the Internal Revenue service itself?

Authorities are, understandably, loathe to talk. Internal Revenue men insist that Proctor's fraud would have been found out in the end, that in the final accounting an employe's statement of withheld taxes, for instance, is matched with his employer's report of the taxes withheld.

It is a calculated risk that the internal revenue service takes, the officials point out, in paying refunds at once and checking later. The government, they say, thereby saves millions of dollars in interest it would have to pay otherwise.

Although the government did become aware that it was being defrauded, that knowledge alone did not find the perpetrator. It is obvious that with a little more care

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(the mistake of renting the typewriter), Proctor may well have gotten away with the $13,009.87. And the government would still be looking for Allen Carl Adams . . .

But it's not advisable for YOU to try it, warns Smoot, a hard look coming into his usually twinkling gray eyes.

Not unless you're willing to risk seeing the inside of a federal prison for a spell.

"Personally, I can't stand the guy. He has a nasty habit of looking you straight in the eye and telling you the truth."

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Accused of poisoning the husband of his mistress, Dr. Gully should have presented a thundering defence. But the distinguished gentleman whom everyone considered a sly old libertine was no man's fool: he knew the value of staying silent . . .

A WEAKNESS FOR WOMEN

by Edgar Lustgarten

"DOCTOR JAMES MANBY GULLY," says the coroner, and a distinguished-looking man of nearly 70 picks his way through the packed court towards the witness-box.

Dr. Gully's impressive looks are not deceptive. His professional reputation stands extremely high. As a pioneer of hydropathic treatment, he has contributed more than any to making Malvern the famous spa it is.

Today, though, Dr. Gully appears to feel unwell. His color is bad, and he sways a little as he takes the oath.

"May he sit down, sir?" asks his counsel.

"Why should he?" cries a juror.

This mannerless interjection excites an unseemly roar of applause from the spectators. Even a few hisses are directed at the witness.

For on this August day of 1876 Dr. Gully is about the best-hated man in England.

All regard him as a sly snake-in-the-grass. Most consider him a vicious libertine. Many even think that he played a sinister part in the death of Charles Bravo, with which the present inquest is concerned. . . .

Charles Bravo was a rich young man who had married a rich young widow the previous year. They established for themselves a luxurious menage at the house that the lady already occupied in Balham — butler, footman, three gardeners, six maids, and as housekeeper a certain Mrs. Cox, who had been the widow's companion and devoted confidante.

They had enjoyed four months of uneventful domesticity when, one evening after they had dined at home, Charles Bravo suddenly took ill.

Spasms of vomiting, severe internal pains, a period of deep insensibility followed by a rising pulse and a discharge of blood — the doctors noted the characteristic signs of poisoning. And a statement by Mrs. Cox bore them out in their opinion; Mr. Bravo, she said, had confided to her in his torment that he had taken poison, but entreated her to keep this knowledge from his wife.

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Bravo, however, told the doctors he had taken nothing. "I say that," he solemnly affirmed, "fully aware that I am going before my Maker."

His prediction, at least, was wholly accurate. Charles Bravo died — as the post-mortem revealed — from a fatal dose of tartar emetic.

Accident could be virtually discounted. If he was murdered the suspicion must be heavy on Mrs. Bravo, or on Mrs. Cox, or on both — but what could have been the motive actuating either?

For that matter, though, what could have been the motive actuating Charles Bravo to destroy himself?

Each alternative seemed inexplicable — until Mrs. Cox belatedly furnished the authorities with some additional and startling information.

She had been so anxious — she told them — to shield her dear friend, Mrs. Bravo, that she had not repeated Mr. Bravo's words in full. But as things had turned out so serious, she felt bound to do so now.

He had not merely said to her, "I have taken poison." He had said, "I have taken poison *because of Gully*."

Mrs. Cox declared herself the less surprised by this because Mr. Bravo had often voiced his strong suspicion — utterly unfounded, she hastened to point out — that Gully was pursuing an intrigue with his wife.

Mrs. Cox's new disclosure, whether true or false, suggested a plausible motive for Charles Bravo's suicide. But it also suggested — as she apparently did not realise — a plausible motive for Charles Bravo's murder.

The cat might jump either way. Only one thing could be written down as certain: whether the murder or the suicide theory was adopted, Dr. Gully had now been involved in the business right up to his neck . . .

The coroner and jury, in the course of numerous sessions, have already learned some remarkable facts concerning Dr. Gully. The lawyers — and especially that fashionable solicitor, George Lewis, who represents the dead man's relatives — got them out of Mrs. Bravo when she testified.

She confessed that she had been Dr. Gully's mistress for several years before her second marriage; that he had taken a house in Balham expressly to be near her; that he was still living at that house when Bravo died.

But, she insisted, she had formally broken with him as soon as Charles Bravo began paying her attention. From that day forward, they had never met.

Had he not kept in touch with her, though? they asked. Had he not sent her medicines when she wasn't well? Didn't she know that Mrs. Cox — Mrs. Cox, her dear friend — had admitted this was so?

Ah yes, Mrs. Bravo said; he sent me a bottle of laurel water once; it came after Mrs. Cox had encountered him accidentally on a train

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and told him I was suffering from insomnia.

It is these revelations that have generated the hostile atmosphere which prevails on Dr. Gully's own appearance. There is hardly a friendly face in court as he regretfully confirms Mrs. Bravo's story, but emphasizes even more urgently than she the finality and completeness of the break. "I even gave orders to my servants," he says, "that Mrs. Bravo and Mrs. Cox were not to be let in."

This is the first point Mr. Lewis fastens on when, with the crowd behind him to a man, he starts on Dr. Gully's cross-examination.

"When did you give those orders to your servants?"

"Immediately after we had separated — about the end of October, 1875."

"Did you ever withdraw those orders?"

"Never."

"When, after Mrs. Bravo's marriage, did you first communicate with Mrs. Cox — accidentally, to use your term and hers?"

"That would be in the March of 1876."

"You then travelled in the same railway carriage with her?"

"By chance," Dr. Gully answers quickly. "I wouldn't have got in if I had known she was there."

"But when you arrived in London from Balham," Mr. Lewis says, "you went into the same carriage in the Underground?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Gully says. "By then I had no reason for doing otherwise."

"Though you had given those orders to your servants?"

It is so much bunkum, Mr. Lewis's tone implies; you and these ladies were still in surreptitious contact.

"Did Mrs. Cox tell you Mrs. Bravo had insomnia?"

"She did."

"Did you ask if she had a doctor attending her at the instance of her husband?"

"No."

"Did you send the bottle of laurel water for Mrs. Bravo through Mrs. Cox at a different address?"

"Yes."

Mr. Lewis's brows contract forbiddingly.

"Were you desirous that it should not be known that you had sent the laurel water?"

"Not the least," says Dr. Gully with some indignation. "But I thought I was forbidden Mrs. Bravo's house in every respect."

"Why didn't you direct the chemist to deliver it there?"

Dr. Gully shakes his handsome head.

"I didn't think of it at all."

Don't pretend to be half-witted, Mr. Lewis's glance implies. Was it really laurel water — or was it tartar emetic?

"You went to Balham," he went on aloud, "simply in order to be near Mrs. Bravo?"

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"Yes."

"No other reason?"

"No."

"So when your association ceased, you had no reason to remain?"

Dr. Gully does not answer.

"Is it five minutes' walk," asks Mr. Lewis meaningly, "from your house to that of Mr. Bravo?"

Dr. Gully's counsel springs up to protest.

"This is questioning for questioning's sake," he says. "The distance is known; it has been proved over and over again."

Mr. Lewis grasps his opportunity.

"Yes; it has been proved over and over again," he agrees. "And this gentleman has chosen to stop within five minutes of the house where Mr. Charles Bravo met his death . . ."

Despite such charges and the jury's patent predilection, they reached an inconclusive verdict in the end. They found that Charles Bravo had been wilfully murdered, but that there was insufficient evidence for them to say without a reasonable doubt by whom.

Myself, I have no doubt that — whatever may be thought about the ladies — Dr. Gully had no connection whatsoever with any aspect of Charles Bravo's death. But the effect of related emotive words is strong.

Lover, Mistress and Poison proved in combination almost irresistible, and put an old gentleman in peril of his life when his greatest sin had been a masculine weakness for a woman.

IT'S AGAINST THE LAW! (in Colorado)*

An old state law prohibits women from wearing dresses shorter than 18 inches from the floor.

Denver has a law which forbids photographing a woman in a bathing suit without her permission.

At weddings in Colorado, guests who throw shoes are breaking the law.

State law prohibits fisherman from angling for trout while on horseback.

Logan County law makes it illegal for a man to kiss a woman while she is asleep without waking her first.

In Durango, it is illegal for a dog to bark between 8 P.M. and 8 A.M.

In Ouray, it is illegal to hunt Elk on Main Street.

It is against Colorado law to serve food in a room which is used for any other purpose.

In Georgetown, it is unlawful to employ a bell-man, or bugle, or blow a steam whistle for longer than 15 seconds without written permission of the Police Judge.

DICK HYMAN

**From the column in "The American Magazine"*

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Before Lee Archer picked up the hitchhiker, he looked him over very carefully. What he saw was not particularly alarming: a short, stocky boy, neat and apparently well brought-up. What Mr. Archer didn't see was the bitterness and hate of a boy born to poverty and disease . . . bitterness and hate that exploded into sudden violence and left a trail of blood across the country . . .

KILLER ON THE RUN

by Edward D. Radin

SINCE HIS EARLY TEENS, WILLIAM E. Cook, Jr. carried his philosophy of life for the world to see. Tattooed across the fingers of his left hand were the words HARD LUCK. Born one of a brood of eleven children to a poor family in Joplin, Missouri, he was the runt of the litter, never attaining a height greater than a few inches above five feet. In addition, he had from birth a permanent droop in his left eyelid that impaired his vision.

His mother died when he was five years old, and after a futile attempt at raising the motherless flock, his father appealed to county authorities for aid. A juvenile court placed the young boy in a foster home but several years later, when he was found to be underfed and clad in tattered clothes, he was sent to another family. The boy told the judge that he would not stay at another foster home and kept running away. When he was eleven the court had no other choice than to send him to a training school. Later he was placed in the custody of a relative, who was working for a religious organization that specializes in saving the souls of adults who have strayed from the path of righteousness, but ten months later, when he was all of fourteen, she informed the court that she found him incorrigible, and he was sent to a reform school.

Young Cook succeeded in escaping, and one night in Joplin entered a cab and directed the driver to take him to a park where he clubbed the hackman with a gun and robbed him of fifteen cents. Later the taximan saw him in town

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and notified police. Still a juvenile, he pleaded guilty to armed robbery and was sent to the Boonville state industrial school. He managed to escape from this institution, too, and several months later was caught tampering with an automobile in Jefferson City, where the state prison is situated. A judge sentenced him to five years imprisonment in a reformatory on the charge. When prison guards found him intractable, despite his age he was transferred to the state prison. After serving most of his sentence, he was released on June 16, 1950. He returned to Joplin for a brief visit with his elderly father and told an acquaintance that the guards had been mean to him. "I hate everybody's guts and everybody hates my guts," he would say.

He left town quietly, and several months later his father received a brief note from him saying that he was working in a café in Blythe, California, near the Arizona state line. His employer found him neat and clean, and he did his work without complaining. Fellow workers, who knew nothing of his past, liked the short, stocky youth. About Christmas, shortly after his twenty-third birthday, he mentioned that he was getting "homesick" and quit his job.

At this point in the story, the scene shifts. Daily throughout the United States, hundreds of people start off on lengthy motor tours, some for pleasure, others on business. Friday, December 29, 1950, was no exception. About three o'clock that afternoon the Mosser family began a trip, leaving their home near Atwood, Illinois. Carl Mosser, thirty-five years old, a prospering tenant farmer, was behind the wheel of his 1949 blue Chevrolet, with his wife, Thelma, seated beside him. In the back seat were their three excited children: Ronald, seven; Gary, five; and Pamela Sue, three.

This was the Mossers' first vacation in several years; they were on their way to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and a New Year's Day reunion with Carl's twin brother, Lieutenant Chris Mosser, assigned to an Army base there. For the happy children the trip was high adventure, a journey of some thirteen hundred miles, during which they would see real live Indians.

Traveling with children requires planning, and the back seat was crowded with assorted sweaters and blankets, thermos bottles and jugs filled with milk and water, even toys and comic books for those moments when a long journey begins to pall on the young.

Mosser had no qualms about making the trip; his car was in excellent mechanical condition, the tires were good, and he had taken the precaution of having the oil changed and the springs greased at his regular station in nearby Hammond before starting out. An attendant had placed the customary sticker on the

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inner door frame showing the speedometer reading for the beginning of the trip to be 15,500 miles. Mosser had no worries about complicated directions to follow. In Springfield, just forty miles from his home he would connect up with U. S. Highway 66, a favorite scenic route with traveling Americans, and stay on it all the way to Albuquerque. This great transcontinental road cuts southwest between Chicago and Los Angeles and slashes through the heart of the country, starting in the broad central plains of Illinois, and continuing through the rolling hills of Missouri, the rich oil lands of Oklahoma, the famous panhandle of Texas, the rugged and incredibly beautiful countryside of New Mexico. From the desert of Arizona it rises to cross the mountains in California, then descends to the West Coast.

It was the perfect road for Mosser, one patrolled constantly by county and state police to keep vehicles moving smoothly and safely. Busy day and night with traffic, service stations and restaurants dot the highway, a necessary consideration when one travels with children. In the event of a breakdown he had no fear of being stranded long since he could count on police or a passing motorist to summon help or give him a lift to the nearest town.

Because they were late in getting started, the Mossers planned to drive through the night, spelling each other at the wheel while the children slept. They wanted to put in as much mileage as possible the first day so they could slow down later in the southwest for sightseeing and still arrive on schedule in Albuquerque on January 1.

Late that same night, Lee Archer, a mechanic, left his home in Tahoka, Texas, for a trip beyond Oklahoma City. His route was more complicated — he traveled at an angle in order to cut into Highway 66 in Oklahoma — but it was a routine journey for him, one he had made several times. He, too, planned to drive through the night in order to reach his destination the following afternoon.

At 1 A.M. he stopped briefly in Lubbock for gas and oil. While his car was being serviced, a hatless young man with brown wavy hair, who had been standing at the edge of the road thumbing for a ride, asked him for a lift. Archer looked the hitchhiker over carefully. Short and stocky, the stranger was neat and clean, dressed in serviceable blue jeans and a brown leather jacket, the fur collar of which was up to protect him from the cold. He was carrying a small duffel bag. When he said he was on his way to Joplin, Archer nodded. "Hop in," he invited. "I'm not going that far but I can drop you off on 66 near Oklahoma City."

And so the two cars, out of the thousands on the highway that night, sped along the road, bright headlights piercing the darkness; one

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traveling southwest, the other, northeast. In the normal course of events they would pass each other in Oklahoma sometime during the coming day, two fast blurs moving in opposite directions on Highway 66.

In the Mosser car, despite their cramped quarters, the three children slept the easy slumber of the young, huddled together under blankets. In the other, Archer found that the stranger was not talkative; he seemed to prefer to stare out at the darkened landscape or to doze off.

At 1:30 A.M. the Mossers were in Missouri, and halted for a rest at an all-night restaurant. The elder Mossers had sandwiches and coffee while the children continued to sleep in the car. Mrs. Mosser dutifully wrote a postcard to her parents in which she mentioned the time and the fact that they already had driven over four hundred miles. She took the card back with her to the car to mail later. Archer also stopped off once during the night, his silent passenger joining him for a cup of coffee.

By morning both cars were in Oklahoma, entering the state from opposite directions. The Mossers ate breakfast in Claremore where Mrs. Mosser wrote a second postcard to another relative, Mrs. Clarence Day, in Bement, Illinois, in which she praised the children for behaving well and remarked that the trip had been trouble-free so far. She posted this card, but forgot to mail the one in the car to her parents.

Archer also had breakfast in Oklahoma and near noon was on the final leg of his journey. Outside Oklahoma City he decided to use a county road that would by-pass the city traffic and bring him onto Highway 66 near Luther, where he would drop off his passenger. He missed the turning-off point at a crossroad. Realizing his error he backed up and came to a stop before turning around. As he did the hitchhiker reached inside his jacket and came out with a nickel-plated gun. "You were going too fast for me to do this before," his passenger said, and ordered the owner to get out of the car. The young gunman took ninety dollars from Archer's wallet and then directed him to get into the car trunk. Although the mechanic pleaded that he might suffocate in the small space, the other kept prodding him with the gun until he was in the trunk, and then slammed the lid down, locking him inside.

By twisting and turning in his cramped quarters, Archer managed to reach a tire iron and succeeded in forcing the lock. When the driver slowed down at a bumpy stretch, Archer tumbled out of the trunk compartment onto the road. Bruised and dazed, he headed across fields toward a distant farmhouse. He heard the gunman jam on the brakes and shout after him, but Archer put on a burst of speed and dodged behind a group of trees. His car roared away at high speed.

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While Archer was telephoning a report to the sheriff's office in Oklahoma City, Kermit Mackey, a farmer who lived outside Luther, was witnessing what appeared to be a normal event on the highway. A black car with Texas plates, in obvious mechanical trouble, wobbled to a halt on the side of the road. The driver, a short hatless youth wearing a brown leather jacket with a fur collar, stepped out. A few moments later a blue car with Illinois plates, heading in the opposite direction, obeyed the universal courtesy of the road and stopped when flagged down by the motorist in distress. After a brief conversation, the hatless youth entered the sedan which then continued on toward Oklahoma City.

Later that day a highway patrol officer spotted the disabled machine and checked the license plates. It was Archer's stolen car. The mechanic was pleased at the rapid recovery of his property. On the front seat he found the duffel bag the hitchhiker had been carrying and turned it over to the police. In it were several changes of clothing, a group photograph of four children with a Kirksville, Missouri, photographer's credit line, an empty box that had contained a .32 caliber automatic pistol, a cleaning brush for the weapon, a box of ammunition with fourteen bullets missing, and a receipt from a store in El Paso, showing that the pistol had been sold to W. E. Cook of St. Louis.

The alarm for the stolen car was canceled with a warning issued to be on the lookout for the armed hitchhiker. Since he had told Archer that he was heading for Joplin and the gun receipt listed St. Louis as his address, police to the northeast were alerted to watch for him.

Meanwhile, unknown to authorities, an incredible terror-filled journey that was to last twenty-five hundred miles began for a family that had set out on a carefree vacation.

About dusk that same Saturday night a blue sedan came to a halt before a country store on the outskirts of Wichita Falls, Texas, 165 miles south of Luther. Two men entered the store, one directly behind the other. The man in the lead was slender, his face pale. Behind him was a short husky youth with wavy brown hair, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

E. O. Cornwell, the owner, was slicing an order of cold cuts for Claude Skinner, who was out of sight in the rear of the store. As the two men advanced, the one in front turned suddenly and grabbed the other, meanwhile shouting to Cornwell, "For God's sake, help me. This man has a gun and is going to kill me and my family."

The startled storekeeper, fearing that he was going to be held up, seized a shotgun he kept hidden behind the counter and ordered the pair to get out of his store. They turned to leave and while near the

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door they grappled. During the brief melee the younger man pushed the other against a window, shattering a pane of glass. He then rushed him outside and into the car.

Skinner ran out to his truck and started after the sedan. It was too dark for him to read the license plate number but he saw a woman and three children in the back. The car quickly outdistanced his truck and he gave up the chase when several shots were fired at him. When he returned to the store, Cornwell was examining a felt hat that had been knocked off the slender man's head during the brief scuffle. The hat was a size 7 and the inside label read, "The Famous Store, Decatur, Ill."

The weekend passed with Oklahoma highway police receiving no lead on the wanted hitchhiker.

Monday, New Year's Day, Lieutenant Chris Mosser waited in Albuquerque for Carl and his family to arrive. When they failed to put in an appearance he reasoned that they had been delayed by the heavy holiday season traffic.

That Monday afternoon, Mrs. Rufus Smith, an observant owner of a combined grocery store and gas station in Winthrop, in the southwest corner of Arkansas, watched a blue car with Illinois plates pull up beyond a gas pump. Two men got out and entered his store. She saw a tearful woman and three crying children staring out from a window of the parked car. The actions of the men puzzled her. One of them walked stiffly, almost mechanically. Behind him slouched a shorter, husky youth who kept his hands in his pockets, and from the way his right pocket bulged Mrs. Smith suspected that he might have a gun. She alerted herself for trouble but the man in front ordered apples, oranges, cans of fruit juices, soft drinks, cigarettes, and asked her to fill a thermos jug with water. The shorter man kept his hands in the pockets of his jacket throughout the transaction and offered no assistance to the other as he carried out the bulky packages. They entered the car and drove off immediately, the woman and the children in the rear seat looking back at the store until they passed out of sight.

Early the following morning, officers in a white police scout car were patrolling the outskirts of Joplin when they noticed a sedan parked off the road and turned their powerful spotlight on it. The car had Illinois plates and was filled with passengers, three children peering out at them from the side windows. The officers checked their alarm sheet, saw no wanted notice for the car, and when the driver did not signal he was in distress they concluded that he had stopped for a rest and the scout car drove off.

About eight o'clock that same morning, some seven hours later, Pete Esseley was driving into Tulsa, Oklahoma. While traveling on a hilly dirt road several miles north

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of the city, he saw a blue car stuck in a muddy ditch. The driver, a stocky youth, asked if he could pull him out. Esseley explained that the road was too narrow and a tow truck with special equipment was needed. His offer to drive the other into town was declined. Some time later an oil truck with a car telephone came along and the chauffeur offered to place a call for a wrecker, but the stranded motorist, who seemed to be nervous, asked for a lift instead. He got out at Osage Hills, a Tulsa suburb, and entered a drugstore at the shopping center. Unfamiliar with the dial system in use there he asked Charles Berkey, the pharmacist, if he would telephone for a taxi. While waiting he paced the floor, peering out of the window every few moments. Before the cab had time to arrive he went outside. Mrs. Marie Hogue saw him hail a cruising taxi.

The following day, Wednesday, January 3, 1951, Deputy Sheriff Warren Smith went out to investigate the car in the ditch. The machine, a 1949 blue Chevrolet sedan with Illinois plates, was unlocked. Smith opened the door and recoiled in shocked surprise. The interior was in bloodstained shambles — clothes, comic books, toys and shoes were scattered everywhere. Several blankets had been torn in narrow strips. Both front and back seat covers were bloodstained and there was a large pool of blood on the floor between the seats. There were three bullet holes in the back seat and another bullet hole in a baby blanket, scorch marks indicating that the gun had been fired at close range.

Smith radioed for assistance and within a short time other deputies and members of the Tulsa police force flocked to the scene. A thorough search of the car revealed that the ignition key was in the lock and in the key case was a driver's license for Carl Mosser. In the glove compartment were a spare set of car keys, an operator's license for Thelma Mosser, a folder containing two hundred dollars' worth of traveler's checks, and an unmailed postcard.

By midafternoon the officals working on the case knew that the Mossers had left Atwood Friday afternoon for Albuquerque. From Mrs. Day in Bement they learned that she had received the card mailed Saturday in Claremore, the next large town northeast of Tulsa, and officers were assigned to check there. They traced the family to the Will Rogers Hotel where they had breakfast. Dorothy Adair, the waitress who had served them, said no one else had been in their party. She recalled that the three children had been wearing cowboy hats and had been looking forward to seeing Indians when they reached Oklahoma City.

Mrs. Day informed authorities that Lieutenant Mosser had telephoned on the previous night, worried because his brother had failed

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to arrive. He was notified of the grim find and obtained an emergency leave from the Army to go to Oklahoma.

A posse of officers and farmers began to hunt through the rugged Osage Hills for some trace of the missing family. Four exploded shells were dug out of the bloodstained upholstery. Police had no clues as to the cause of the shooting or to the identity of the short youth who had left the car in the ditch. The fact that the pool of blood in the car had not dried completely indicated that the shooting must have occurred not too long before the car was abandoned. Police had hopes that some of the five Mossers, although wounded, might still be alive.

Officials were puzzled by the mileage on the car. The speedometer now read 18,601 miles, some 3,100 miles more than at the start of the trip. Tulsa is less than 600 miles from Atwood.

Tracing the progress of the family on Highway 66, officers arrived in Luther and it was here that the tangled threads began to unwind. They received a report of the holdup of Archer. Mackey's description of the car which the fleeing man hailed for a lift matched the Mosser sedan.

Working swiftly now, the photograph found in the bandit's duffel bag was taken to Kirksville where the photographer identified it as the portrait he had made of the children of a local family. Members of the family said they had given the picture to William E. Cook, Jr., a relative, when he visited them in June after his release from prison.

Cook's record was obtained and newspapers soon carried the story that he was being sought. They described him as a hardened criminal who had been in prison since he was eleven years old and had served time for highway robbery and automobile theft.

Cook's picture was identified by Archer as the man who held him up and hi-jacked his car, while Esseley selected his rogues' gallery photograph as that of the man who abandoned the Mosser car in the ditch. The witnesses in the drugstore also recognized the photograph. But even with this information, all attempts to trace Cook from the time he had stepped into the passing taxi in Osage Hills failed.

During the next few days some of the details of the Mosser family's nightmarish trip were filled in as Cornwell, Mrs. Smith and the officers in the scout car all reported their stories. Evidently Cook had forced Mosser to drive in a giant semicircle, but this accounted for only about a thousand of the twenty-five hundred extra miles.

A two-pronged search was now under way, one for Cook and the other for the Mossers. Police in Texas, Arkansas and Missouri joined in the search for the vanished family. After leaving Mrs. Smith's store in Winthrop, the blue sedan would

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have had to travel through the Cookson Hills to reach Joplin, and hundreds of volunteer searchers combed this area, once a favorite hiding place for outlaws.

The FBI also entered the case and obtained a Federal warrant against Cook for fleeing Oklahoma to avoid prosecution for robbery. Thousands of "wanted" notices carrying his photograph and description were sent to law enforcement officials throughout the Southwest.

With the tattoo on his left hand and his drooping eyelid Cook should have been easily recognizable, but days passed with no progress in the search for him. Then on Saturday, January 6, Deputy Sheriff Homer Waldrip of Riverside County, California, recognized the description of Cook as the man who had worked in the Blythe café until Christmas. The deputy's wife had been a waitress in the same restaurant, and he had met Cook. He found it difficult to believe that the quiet young man could be the much-sought desperado. Although he doubted that Cook had doubled back on his tracks, he recalled that he had lived in a motel near the café and had been friendly with another permanent resident there. Hoping that the other might have heard from him, Waldrip went to this man's cabin and rapped at the door. He stepped inside as the door swung open and a moment later a gun was jammed into his side. Cook was alone in the cabin.

Taking the deputy's gun, Cook forced him into the police car and directed him to drive west into the Chocolate Mountains and then south on a dirt road into the desert toward the Mexican border. For more than fifty miles the hapless officer had to drive with a gun pressed against his ribs. During the long ride Cook said that he had killed seven people and would not be taken alive. He claimed he had disposed of a family of five in Oklahoma and buried their bodies in snowdrifts where they never would be found. Finally, in a remote area, Cook ordered Waldrip to stop the car and led the officer off the road, where he tied his hands and feet. Waldrip waited for the bullet that would end his life, but Cook went back to the car and drove off leaving the deputy sheriff trussed up.

Almost two hours passed before Waldrip was able to free himself and he started walking toward the nearest town of Ogilby, many miles distant near the Mexican border. Later that afternoon he was picked up by customs agents on border patrol. Seventeen miles outside of Yuma, Arizona, they found Waldrip's car parked on the road, one door open. The officers approached the machine warily and then looked at each other when they saw a man slumped over in the seat. They ran over. There was a dead man in the car, but it was not Cook. The man had been murdered, shot in the back.

From papers in his pockets he

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was identified as Robert H. Dewey, thirty-two, of Seattle, Washington. Sheriff Robert Ware of Imperial County was notified, and road blocks were set up to halt all traffic and inspect every car on the highway.

The investigators learned that Dewey had been visiting his father in nearby Spring Valley, California, and then had left on his way to a hunting and fishing vacation in the mountain ranges. He had been driving a new Buick filled with food supplies, blankets and a camp stove. In addition to his fishing equipment there had been two rifles in his car. Now Cook was armed to the teeth with two pistols and two rifles. He also had enough equipment to enable him to hide out for weeks. He could have slipped into the mountains of California, cut into the deserts of Arizona, or sneaked across the border into Mexico.

An intensive manhunt began in the southwest corner on both sides of the border. From Phoenix an air posse of seventeen planes went up to search the area between Phoenix and Blythe. Cook had discarded a red shirt he had been wearing under his jacket and bloodhounds were given his scent and taken into the mountain areas. Armed possemen patrolled the highways with orders to shoot to kill. U. S. Immigration Service officers joined in the hunt on the American side, while Mexican territorial police searched through the desolate area on the other side. But no Cook.

Meanwhile, back in Oklahoma, police searched through every section where snow had fallen without finding any trace of the Mosser family. No other victims were found.

The search for Cook came to a dead end forty miles below the twin border cities of Alexico and Mexicali near the small Mexican fishing village of San Felipe on the Gulf of California. Police Chief Guy Woodward of El Centro, California, who had been ranging both sides of the border in his search for the outlaw, found Dewey's car parked on the side of the road, most of the equipment still in the back. From dusty tire tracks and footprints, it was evident that Cook had succeeded in flagging down a car and getting still another lift. All highways in the lower California peninsula were plastered with "wanted" notices bearing Cook's picture.

On January 10, it was feared that two more victims had been added to Cook's rampage. Relatives of Forest Damron and James Burke, both in their early thirties, reported that the two men had left their homes in El Centro on January 5 for a weekend trip to prospect for gold in the Chocolate Mountains and had not been heard from since. They had been riding in Burke's 1950 maroon Studebaker. Both men were experienced prospectors and relatives scoffed at the possibility that they could have lost their way.

The FBI rushed additional agents to lower California and jeep patrols,

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horse-mounted officers and even helicopters were pressed into the search. By now more than a thousand men were combing the entire Southwest for a trace of the Mossers or Cook. The governors of Arkansas and Oklahoma issued a proclamation setting aside Sunday, January 14, as "Carl Mosser Day" for state-wide searchers for the missing family of five.

The search for the Mossers came to an end the next day. A young man who knew Cook sought out Detective Chief Carl E. Nutt of Joplin and told him that after Cook had been released from prison he had asked him to take part in several holdups with him. They had been driving by a mine shaft just outside of town at the time and Cook pointed to it and threatened to throw the other down the shaft when he refused.

While it was a slim enough lead, Nutt decided to follow it up and, accompanied by several men, explored a group of abandoned mines less than two miles from the heart of Tulsa. The openings had been covered with heavy planks. At one of the mines the men noticed that several of the boards were loose. Pulling them hastily aside, they directed powerful searchlights to the bottom of the shaft. Several bodies could be seen floating in the water that had seeped into the old workings.

Emergency equipment was brought to the scene and a special hoist was rigged up. A fireman wearing a gas mask was lowered to the bottom and five times the hoist rose with a body. All the Mossers were dead. Carl Mosser, his hands tied behind his back with the cord from one of his children's cowboy hats, had been shot once through the head. His wife had died with a bullet in her chest. Two of the children had been shot more than once. Powder burns about the bullet holes showed that Cook had held the weapons directly against his victims when he fired.

That same day the search for Cook also came to an end. Police Chief Fransisco Kraus-Morales of Tijuana, Mexico, received a visit from Jerry Grant and Xavier Gonzales, employees of a Mexican lead mine. They reported that they had seen a maroon car with three Americans in it while driving along a narrow road several hundred miles south of the border. At that time they knew nothing of the search for Cook and the two missing prospectors. Chief Morales promptly left by plane for the village nearest the place where the men had been seen. He was told that three *Americanos* had passed through there several days earlier, heading south. At Punta Prieta, the next large town sixty miles further south, he received similar information; the car had passed through.

The officer finally arrived in Santa Rosalia, six hundred miles south of the American border, and

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hurried to police headquarters. No one had seen the car pass through yet, he was informed. Accompanied by four local officers, Morales began to explore the town. They saw three men, one of whom answered Cook's description — short and husky and wearing a leather jacket — enter a restaurant. The officers waited for a few minutes for the group to get settled and then walked in quietly with guns drawn. Cook was sitting with his back to the door, facing the other two men. The officers jammed a gun into Cook's back and told him to stand up with hands raised. He obeyed meekly and the officers quickly frisked him, finding two pistols in his jacket and a rifle alongside his chair.

The two men with him were Damron and Burke, the missing prospectors. They said that they had been driving near the border when they saw Cook stalled on the road in the blue Buick. Knowing nothing about the search for him, they stopped to see if they could help him. He promptly pulled a gun on them and ordered them to drive over the border and head south. He kept them captive for seven days, his gun always in hand. At night he sat against a tree or a rock with his gun in his lap. If they made the slightest move during the night he was awake, his weapon trained on them. They never were able to catch him asleep.

They had known nothing of the search for them because their car radio did not work below the border.

Chief Morales flew his prisoner back to Tijuana and escorted him to the border where he handed him over to waiting FBI agents. Taken to San Diego, Cook claimed he had lost his memory and knew nothing about any shootings. He said that he began drinking in Blythe on Christmas night and the next thing he knew he found himself sitting in a disabled car in Mexico.

But after several days Cook began to talk. He had started his rampage with the holdup of Archer. He said that he pulled a gun on Mosser after entering the car and by threatening to shoot the children prevented him from signaling to police while they were driving through Oklahoma City. From Wichita Falls he had decided to allow the Mossers to go on to Albuquerque but not on Highway 66. They drove through Texas and entered New Mexico. Near Carlsbad Caverns with the heavy tourist traffic, Mosser had made another attempt to win freedom for his family, but he was subdued by the gun. Cook ordered him to turn around and drive to Houston. They finally entered Arkansas, and Cook ordered him to drive to Joplin.

It was the police scout car that had raked the parked machine with its spotlight that, ironically, set off the mass murder. With rescue so close at hand, the Mossers became hysterical when they saw the police car drive away. Unable to quiet his captives, Cook started shooting and

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wiped out the family of five. Then he drove to the abandoned mine shaft where he dumped their bodies. After driving all night to Tulsa he lost control and the car went into the ditch.

He used the stolen police car to stop Dewey, posing as an officer. The latter became nervous when he falsely accused him of leaving the scene of an accident and dropped a cigarette. Cook thought he was reaching for a gun and shot him. Later, when he searched the body, he found Dewey had been unarmed.

Although both Missouri and California wanted to press murder charges against Cook, the FBI refused to surrender the prisoner and he was indicted under the federal Lindbergh kidnap law, which carries the death penalty if recommended by a jury.

He pleaded guilty, but his court-appointed lawyers, with whom he refused to consult, added a plea of insanity. A hearing was held on March 13 by Federal District Court Judge Stephen S. Chandler. After several psychiatrists testified that Cook was not insane, the court accepted his guilty plea and ruled against holding a jury trial on the question of the death sentence.

After reviewing Cook's early childhood since he was thrust into a cruel foster home at the age of five, Judge Chandler said, "Society stands indicted for the crime of letting this child be mistreated."

Over the protests of the United States Attorney prosecuting the case, he sentenced Cook to sixty years in prison for each Mosser, a total of three hundred years, and directed that he be confined to Alcatraz.

Federal authorities, who had hoped for the death penalty, now surrendered the prisoner to California, where he had been indicted for the murder of Dewey. On November 28, 1951, he was found guilty by a jury that rejected his plea of insanity and he was sentenced to death by gas at San Quentin Prison.

Solution to Mystery Puzzle on page 100

The Inspector meant that Bob Tillstrom was in immediate danger of a friendly punch in the nose. The Inspector had noted the thin coat of dust over all the contents of the safe — a necklace just removed would have left a mark in that dust. He also noted that the glass from the broken window was largely outside, indicating it had been broken from the inside, and not from the outside, to gain entrance. This, considered in light of the fact that the Inspector had two weeks left to pay his tax, indicated that this was April 1st, and an April Fool's joke was being played on the Inspector.

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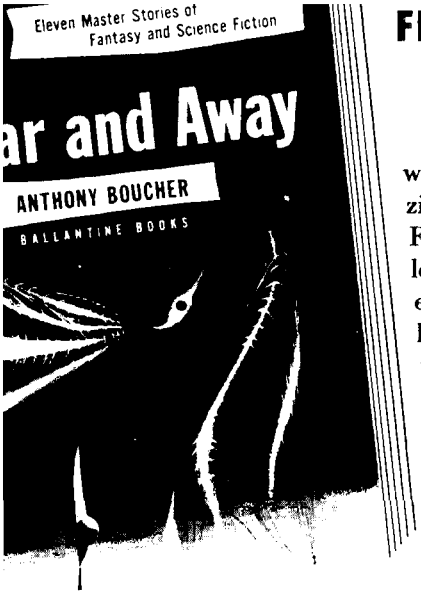

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